

PRICE \$8.99

JULY 6 & 13, 2020

THE NEW YORKER



NELSON

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

THE NEW YORKER

JULY 6 & 13, 2020

4 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

15 THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Amy Davidson Sorkin on the new COVID-19 spikes; the fireworks conundrum; Bill Nighy's threads; problematic wallpaper; prepper real estate; summer evening.

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

Alec MacGillis

20 The Dollar-Store Deaths

A business model that harms vulnerable communities.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Craig Thomas

27 Studio Notes on Your Rom-Com Screenplay

ANNALS OF SCIENCE

Susan Orlean

28 Rabbit Fever

A deadly animal virus spreads in the U.S.

A REPORTER AT LARGE

Larissa MacFarquhar

34 An Ocean Apart

How the outside world came to the Falkland Islands.

THE POLITICAL SCENE

Jeffrey Toobin

46 The Surrender

Why the Mueller investigation was a failure.

FICTION

Hari Kunzru

56 "A Transparent Woman"

THE CRITICS

ON TELEVISION

Doreen St. Félix

66 "I May Destroy You."

A CRITIC AT LARGE

Leo Robson

69 Joyce Carol Oates's "Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars."

BOOKS

73 Briefly Noted

Jonathan Dee

75 David Mitchell's "Utopia Avenue."

MUSICAL EVENTS

Alex Ross

78 Musicians react to the pandemic and the protests.

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Anthony Lane

80 "Irresistible," "Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga."

POEMS

Rita Dove

50 "Pedestrian Crossing, Charlottesville"

Megan Fernandes

62 "Shanghai"

COVER

Kadir Nelson

"Distant Summer"

DRAWINGS Elisabeth McNair, Sam Gross, Ellis Rosen, Emily Flake, Patrick McKelvie, Benjamin Schwartz, Bishakh Som, Lars Kenseth, Paul Karasik, Harry Bliss and Steve Martin, Liana Finck, Seth Fleishman, Brendan Loper, Amy Hwang, Roz Chast, Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby, Sofia Warren, Matilda Borgström **SPOTS** Christoph Abbederis

Created by the editors of
ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST,
AD PRO is the members-only resource
for design industry professionals

ADPRO



MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES

- .Exclusive, must-read industry and market news
- .Trend reports and the best new product sources
- .Effective tools and events to grow your business
- .Searchable *AD* archive spanning 100 years of magazine issues
- .More essential resources that only *AD* has access to

Join now and save 20% off
your annual membership

ARCHDIGEST.COM / JOINNOW

CONTRIBUTORS

Larissa MacFarquhar (*"An Ocean Apart,"* p. 34), a staff writer, is the author of *"Strangers Drowning: Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Urge to Help."*

Alec MacGillis (*"The Dollar-Store Deaths,"* p. 20), a reporter for ProPublica, wrote *"The Cynic: The Political Education of Mitch McConnell."* This article is a collaboration between *The New Yorker* and ProPublica.

Megan Fernandes (*Poem*, p. 62) is the author of the poetry collection *"Good Boys."*

Kadir Nelson (*Cover*) won a Caldecott Medal for his illustrations for Kwame Alexander's book-length poem, *"The Undefeated."*

Anna Boots (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 16) is a member of the magazine's editorial staff.

Leo Robson (*A Critic at Large*, p. 69) is a contributing writer for *The New Statesman*.

Jeffrey Toobin (*"The Surrender,"* p. 46) is a staff writer. His latest book, *"True Crimes and Misdemeanors: The Investigation of Donald Trump,"* will be published in August.

Susan Orlean (*"Rabbit Fever,"* p. 28), a staff writer, is the author of, most recently, *"The Library Book."*

Rumaan Alam (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 17) has published three novels, including the forthcoming *"Leave the World Behind."*

Rita Dove (*Poem*, p. 50), a Pulitzer Prize winner and a former U.S. Poet Laureate, received a W. E. B. Du Bois Medal from Harvard University in 2019. She teaches at the University of Virginia.

Hari Kunzru (*Fiction*, p. 56) has written six novels, including *"Gods Without Men,"* *"White Tears,"* and *"Red Pill,"* which comes out in September.

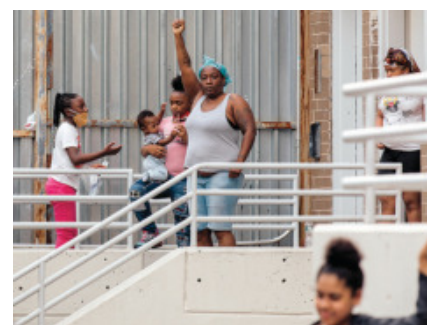
Craig Thomas (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 27), a television and film writer, is a co-creator of *"How I Met Your Mother."*

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



LETTER FROM SILICON VALLEY

Anna Wiener on the rise of ghost kitchens and the future of their once-marginal business model.



NEWS DESK

How can communities defund the police? Alexis Okeowo on the groups that are reimagining safety.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week's magazine and all issues back to 2008.

THE MAIL

ICELAND'S VIRUS STRATEGY

I found Elizabeth Kolbert's report on Iceland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic thought-provoking ("Independent People," June 8th & 15th). It is difficult not to compare that country's actions with those of the United States, but we must recall the social factors that played a role in Iceland's outcomes. Kolbert states that by mid-May Iceland had tested 15.5 per cent of its population for the virus, which amounts to sixty thousand people. Meanwhile, the U.S. had tested only 3.4 per cent of its population—eleven million people. That difference in scale is important to keep in mind. In addition, Iceland, as Kolbert mentions, possesses one of the most genetically homogeneous populations in the world—a fact that must have made virus sequencing more straightforward. This genetic similarity also has cultural implications. As one interviewee said, "Everybody knows everyone in Iceland." A sense of solidarity may explain why Icelanders so willingly follow protocols. Finally, Iceland's geographic isolation and small size have enabled it to contain the virus more easily than a large, cosmopolitan country, such as the U.S., can. Although the U.S. can learn much from Iceland, we must first disentangle circumstantial variables from the Icelanders' proactive management of this public-health crisis.

Bernard J. Clark III
Lewes, Del.

HOPPER'S WOMEN

Peter Schjeldahl, in his piece about Edward Hopper, draws attention to the artist's brand of "wary individualism" (The Art World, June 8th & 15th). I was thus surprised that he did not mention Hopper's preoccupation with women's growing independence during the twentieth century. What was Hopper trying to tell us about the woman seated at the diner in Greenwich Village in "Nighthawks"? Maybe simply that she is emancipated and working,

as millions were in 1942, to win the war. "Cape Cod Morning" is similarly fixated on a woman, who is not in the kitchen but in a window, looking out at the world. These sorts of individualistic women appear throughout Hopper's oeuvre. In "The Office at Night," we see a woman testing the boundaries of traditional morality; in "Hotel Room," a woman reading alone in her rented room; in "Tables for Ladies," a scene in which women can have lunch by themselves, without needing a man to legitimize the outing; and, in "Morning in a City," a nude woman standing before a window, defying convention. Hopper was perhaps illiberal in his politics, but, as these works testify, his art was frequently about the aftermath of social revolution.

James R. Brett
Temecula, Calif.

REMEMBERING WARHOL

As Joan Acocella attests, Blake Gopnik's biography of Andy Warhol is probably the most complete chronicle to date about my uncle (Books, June 8th & 15th). However, Gopnik furthers a misconception about Warhol's death, in 1987, which also goes unexamined by Acocella. Gopnik implies that Warhol died because he waited so long to have his gallbladder removed. While that is partially true, my family and I believe that New York Hospital made some mistakes that contributed to my uncle's death from heart failure. My family and the Warhol estate brought a wrongful-death suit against the hospital, which, in 1991, was settled. Today, we marvel at the incredible influence that Warhol continues to have on the world, decades after he passed away.

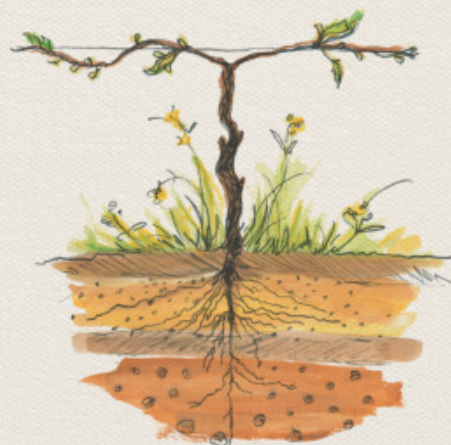
James Warhola
Long Island City, N.Y.

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

A TO Z WINEWORKS
A to Z

CONNECTING
EARTH TO TABLE

Steadfast,
we tend the vines,
prepare for harvest,
and offer wines
from last year's labor.



ARISTOCRATIC WINES
AT DEMOCRATIC PRICES®

*"You do not need to know
precisely what is happening,
or exactly where it is all going.*

*What you need is to
recognize the possibilities
and challenges offered
by the present moment,*

*and to embrace them with
courage, faith, and hope."*

—Thomas Merton

Certified

Corporation

*Best
for the World*
2015, 2016, 2017,
2018 & 2019

ATOZWINEWORKS.COM

In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, and cinemas have closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.

JULY 1 – 14, 2020



GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



On July 2, **Caramoor**, a summertime classical-music destination housed on a verdant estate near Katonah, New York, inaugurates a boldly reconceived festival, featuring both online concerts and outdoor events that allow for social distancing. To kick things off, the superb pianist Inon Barnatan (pictured above) live-streams a recital of Schubert's ebullient Sonata in A Major (D. 959) and his own transcription of Rachmaninoff's enigmatic "Symphonic Dances" from the stage of Caramoor's newly renovated Music Room.

PHOTOGRAPH BY VICTOR LLORENTE

ART

Edward Hopper

I haven't seen this large show at the Beyeler Foundation, Switzerland's premier museum of modern art. I take its fine catalogue, "Edward Hopper: A Fresh Look at Landscape," edited by the exhibition's curator, Ulf Küster, as occasion enough for reflecting anew on the artist's stubborn force. (A selection of Hopper's paintings is also on view on the museum's Web site.) The visual bard of American solitude—not loneliness, a maudlin projection—speaks to our isolated states these days with fortuitous poignance. But Hopper is always doing that, pandemic or no pandemic. Aloneness is his great theme, symbolizing America: insecure selfhoods in a country that is only abstractly a nation. ("E pluribus unum," a magnificent ideal, thuds on "unum" every day throughout the land.) The emotional tug of all of Hopper's characters requires their unawareness of being looked at. To see them is to take on a peculiar responsibility. Can you pledge patriotic allegiance to a void? Hopper shows how, exploring a condition in which, by being separate, we belong together. You don't have to like the idea, but, once you've truly experienced this painter's art, it is as impossible to ignore as a stone in your shoe.—*Peter Schjeldahl* (*fondationbeyeler.ch*)

Salman Toor

This New York-based painter's first solo museum show, titled "How Will I Know," was originally slated to open in March, at the Whitney. Until it does, an astute, amply illustrated essay by Ambika Trasi, a curatorial assistant at the museum, tides us over online. Centuries blur in Toor's superb, art-historically minded tableaux. "Bar Boy," from 2019, shows an isolated figure in a busy absinthe-hued barroom—it might be nineteenth-century Paris, if the young man weren't staring down at his phone. But there's another key difference at play between Toor and his European forebears. The artist, who was born in Lahore, Pakistan, usually depicts queer South Asian men; he disrupts Impressionism's Orientalist tradition while borrowing its painterly and compositional tricks. "Bedroom Boy," also from last year, reimagines the trope of the reclining nude as a slender, hirsute young man snapping a come-hither selfie. Other vignettes depict the decidedly un-erotic anxieties of immigration, and the scrutiny that Toor and others who look like him are subjected to when they travel. In her essay, Trasi sees the artist's stylized treatment of personal experience as a visual corollary to contemporary autofiction. The literary parallel is apt: evocative stories and sympathetic characters emerge from Toor's exacting scenes, which seem painted from a watchful, passionate first-person perspective.—*Johanna Fateman* (*whitney.org*)

Willi Smith Community Archive

This engrossing, chatty resource is an online, crowdsourced companion to the Cooper Hewitt's (temporarily closed) exhibition "Willi Smith: Street Couture," which is devoted to the career of the pathbreaking Afri-

can-American designer, a defining figure of the nineteen-eighties fashion scene. Its trove of images and anecdotes illuminates Smith's expansive, democratic vision and the innovations and influence of his label WilliWear, while charting his tragically short career. The designer died in 1987, when he was only thirty-nine, of AIDS-related causes. Smith had strong ties to the art world: his oversized, often gender-fluid silhouettes and tweaked utilitarianism were featured in dances by the choreographers Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane and Dianne McIntyre. Smith and his business partner Laurie Mallet also launched a line of T-shirts printed with images by a diverse range of artists—from Jenny Holzer to Futura 2000—long before such collaborations became run of the mill. But the designer's broad appeal is perhaps best evinced by the archive's charming paens from his fans, such as an entry from Patrick Patterson, who, as a teen-ager in Corinth, Mississippi, sewed a jacket from a WilliWear McCall's pattern. He is seen posing in it for a snapshot, standing in what looks like a school library—a paragon of understated chic.—*J.F. (cooperhewitt.org)*

MUSIC

Thom Bell: "Ready or Not"

R. & B. The story of Philadelphia soul music is typically told through the lens of the writer-producers Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff, but Thom Bell was an equally vital figure. He was Gamble and Huff's primary arranger—the O'Jays' "Back Stabbers" is unimaginable without Bell's strings—as well as the producer of classics by the Stylistics, the Delfonics, and the Spinners. "Ready or Not: Thom Bell's Philly Soul Arrangements & Productions 1965-1978" proffers his wedding-cake-ornate orchestrations as a critical through line from soul to

disco and, particularly, the subgenre of quiet storm, as exemplified in Teddy Pendergrass's torrid "Close the Door."—*Michaelangelo Matos*

Phoebe Bridgers: "Punisher"

INDIE ROCK On Phoebe Bridgers's stunning new album, "Punisher," the singer-songwriter unspools quiet, wry observations about the uncertainties of millennial life over bucolic guitars and ghostly synths. Her understated songs float from constant, quivering anxiety to a glowing sense of serenity. On "I Know the End," her lithe vocals build out a haunting, apocalyptic scene: "I'm not afraid to disappear / The billboard said 'The End Is Near' / I turned around, there was nothing there / Yeah, I guess the end is here." Meanwhile, the instrumentation blossoms into an arrangement that's euphoric yet foreboding. The effect is akin to standing blissfully on a cliff's edge, unable to see the dark depths below.—*Julysa Lopez*

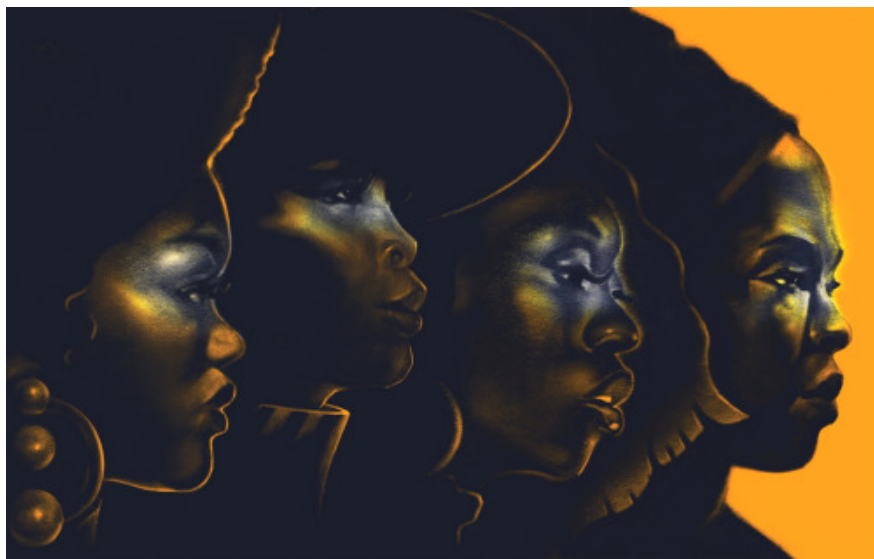
Sammy Brue: "Crash Test Kid"

ROCK At nineteen, the Utah-based singer and songwriter Sammy Brue is already something of an old hand, having made the rounds as a busker at the age of ten. As the decades tick on, youthful allegiance to a medium as creaky as rock and roll seems an increasingly eccentric endeavor; Brue's loyalty to the genre is roughly akin to an adolescent Little Richard devoting himself to Tin Pan Alley and tooting around on a penny-farthing bicycle. Yet on "Crash Test Kid," Brue's second LP, the music remains a channel for ardor and catharsis. The album was produced by Iain Archer, a tenured Irish musician, who joins Brue as a co-writer on all but two songs. It's a wise pairing—even talented teens may not grasp the novelty and the power of their own freshness, which here gets harnessed on ballads and scorches alike. "I'm waiting, waiting," Brue sings, moments

MONUMENTS



In late June, the American Museum of Natural History made a clear-eyed decision to remove a statue of three men from its front steps. Only one has a name (or a shirt, for that matter): Theodore Roosevelt, on horseback, looms over an indigenous and a black figure. New York City has more work to do if it's to rectify racism in public art, not to mention the city's shortage of tributes to women. Happily, several new projects are under way, including a soaring silhouette of the U.S. congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, by Amanda Williams and Olalekan Jeyifous, arriving in Prospect Park next year. Right now, **Simone Leigh's** sixteen-foot-tall monument to black womanhood, "Brick House" (pictured)—the inaugural commission of the High Line Plinth—keeps vigil above Tenth Avenue at Thirtieth Street.—*Andrea K. Scott*



Teyana Taylor's third studio record, titled simply "The Album," was supposed to come out this past December, but, in a welcome turn of fate, she embraced the idea of releasing it on June 19. "It falls perfectly on Juneteenth, yes, it's a celebration," she wrote in a recent op-ed for *Billboard*. The music—a glossy, glorious display of slick R. & B. with touches of throwback nineties production—is itself an act of rejoicing, as Taylor explores motherhood, sex, love, desire, and feminine strength with searing intimacy. The opener features a frantic 911 call that her husband made when she unexpectedly began giving birth in their home; he and her daughter make cameos on later songs, joining a lengthy list of collaborators that includes Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott, and Ms. Lauryn Hill. Their presence reinforces the album's sense of community and triumph.—*Julyssa Lopez*

before his band bursts to attention, "for teenage mayhem yet to come."—*Jay Ruttenberg*

"Pssst . . ."

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL Prohibition, which was enacted a century ago, is an equivocal milestone to commemorate with a music series today, but, then again, it was a ban that forced people to get creative about the way they gathered in the evenings for a little fun. With "Pssst . . .," Beth Morrison Projects opens its own virtual night club—or speakeasy, if you will—that features a string of performances by Lauren Worsham, Isaiah Robinson, Joseph Keckler, and Sol Ruiz, among others, tied together in a loose narrative by the director Ashley Tata. Audience members buy a ticket for a Zoom link, and attendance, naturally, is strictly limited.—*Oussama Zahr (July 9-10 at 8 and 10.)*

Scofield, Stewart & Swallow: "Swallow Tales"

JAZZ Despite a distinguished six-decade career, Steve Swallow is still something of a musician's musician. An inventive electric bassist and an inspired composer who's been hiding in plain sight, Swallow is treasured by discerning jazz luminaries

such as the influential guitarist John Scofield and the adroit drummer Bill Stewart, who join him on the album "Swallow Tales." The attention is on the elder statesman's work, including "Falling Grace," "Eiderdown," and "Hullo Bolinas," each as alluring as when they were essayed, long ago, by the titans Gary Burton and Bill Evans. Utilizing this exemplary material, the experienced trio sounds primed for a few more decades of spirited interaction.—*Steve Futterman*

Cory Smythe: "Accelerate Every Voice"

CHORAL In 1969, Andrew Hill, an idiosyncratic jazz master who'd gigged with Charlie Parker and studied with Paul Hindemith, paired a vocal chorus with a hard-swinging quintet to record "Lift Every Voice," a buoyant set of upbeat incantations. Now, just over fifty years later, Cory Smythe—like Hill, an improvisatory pianist and composer whose work bridges disparate practices—takes Hill's album as the starting point for "Accelerate Every Voice," an odyssey that also references the songwriter and activist James Weldon Johnson, historic and modern-day a cappella groups, and Annea Lockwood's climate-conscious piano experiments. Smythe's intricate vocal lattices, eerily harmonized with

microtonal keyboards and driven by beatbox rhythms, evoke a complex web of social and environmental concerns. The vertiginous flights and tightly choreographed maneuvers undertaken by his five superb singers produce a visceral thrill that's wholly seductive.—*Steve Smith*

Micah Thomas: "Tide"

JAZZ Début albums are ambitious by design, but "Tide" introduces a twenty-two-year-old jazz pianist whose gifts, bolstered by considerable idiomatic breadth, are prodigious in the extreme. In a time marked by big existential questions for working musicians (Will the future of everything be live-streamed?), Micah Thomas, a Juilliard Jazz alum from Columbus, Ohio, makes a persuasive argument for the act of performing in a roomful of attentive listeners. In March, 2019, he brought a raft of canny original compositions to his trio gig at Kitano, a hotel bar in Manhattan's Murray Hill neighborhood. Thomas's rhythm section adds precise dynamics to his extraordinary sense of pacing, most notably on the extended improvisations in "The Game" and on the album's title track. Other pieces ("Grounds," "Tornado") mix invention with an air of familiarity, as if auditioning for a place in the jazz canon.—*K. Leander Williams*

DANCE

Ballet Hispánico

Edwaard Liang, a former New York City Ballet dancer who is now a choreographer and the director of BalletMet, created "El Viaje" for Ballet Hispánico in 2019. As a choreographer, Liang favors a generalized emotionalism that manifests in sinuous, curvaceous forms. The piece, set to "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis," by Ralph Vaughan Williams, is ostensibly about emigration and the search for a new life, but, rather than a literal illustration of this theme, Liang offers hints of the longings and losses of individuals within a group. The piece will be broadcast, on July 8, on the company's Web site and its Facebook and YouTube pages.—*Marina Harss (ballethispanico.org)*

DTH on Demand

Dance Theatre of Harlem's streaming schedule continues, on July 11, with video of a 2019 performance in the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum. The program is past meets present. Representing the company's early days is "Tones II," a recent revision of a 1971 neoclassical piece by the troupe's founder, Arthur Mitchell. It's a disciple's faithful copy of Balanchine's mid-century modernism. Representing the now is "Nyman String Quartet #2," made last year by the company's excellent resident choreographer, Robert Garland. It looks back at Balanchine, too, but also at Mitchell, with doses of black vernacular fun and an inspirational vibe.—*Brian Seibert (dancetheatreofharlem.org/dthondemand)*

Jacob's Pillow

It won't be the same as taking a trip to the Berkshires to visit the country's foremost summer dance festival, a bucolic mecca of the art, but Jacob's Pillow is offering a virtual substitute this year, with eight weeks of talks, classes, and performance footage. For depth and variety,

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT WILLIAMS



GAME CHANGER PISTACHIOS ARE A COMPLETE PROTEIN

© 2020 American Pistachio Growers

Roasted American-grown pistachios are a source of protein that contain all nine of the essential amino acids in adequate amounts for persons over five years of age, as shown by the Protein Digestibility Corrected Amino Acid Score (PDCAAS), and are therefore, a *complete* protein for that age group.

AmericanPistachios.org/complete



the festival's performance archive is hard to beat, and each Thursday a new sample will be streamed, starting, on July 8, with classics by José Limón, including "The Moor's Pavane" and "Chaconne," filmed at the Pillow in 2018.—*B.S. (jacobspillow.org)*

JoyceStream: Olivier Tarpaga

In Olivier Tarpaga's subtle "Declassified Memory Fragment," from 2015, which the Joyce Theatre is streaming July 2-31, the choreographer draws upon memories of military coups in his homeland, Burkina Faso. This declassifying is an act of candor, a scathing look at political corruption and power. But the tone of Tarpaga's truth-telling is often gently humorous, with a dark undertow. At one point, two men, fighting for dominance, wrestle to wear the same jacket of authority—a silly scene with lethal implications. Such vignettes of loose-limbed dancing are in free conversation with the now lilting, now rollicking music, composed by Tarpaga and played by the Dafra Kura Band.—*B.S. (joyce.org/engage/joycestream)*

Miami City Ballet

"Symphonic Dances," set to Rachmaninoff's eponymous suite, is a dramatic and

enigmatic ballet that was created by Alexei Ratmansky, for Miami City Ballet, in 2012. It belongs to the same period as his "Concerto DSCH" and "Shostakovich Trilogy," with which it shares an air of heroism and strife that emerges from the struggle between the individual and the collective. As Ratmansky has said, its three movements encompass "everything from war to love and death." Running through the ballet, too, is an interesting theme of doubling and alter egos. Miami City Ballet dances it with all the fire it requires; a performance will be streaming on the company's Facebook page on July 10.—*M.H.*

School of American Ballet

Each June, this elite ballet school—the feeder for New York City Ballet—offers a performance at which it showcases its promising young dancers, many of whom are likely to continue on to a professional life at the theatre across the square. Here, balletomanes can catch a first glimpse of a singular talent before watching it blossom, or not, in the years that follow. The Workshop performance was cancelled this year; instead, the school will broadcast an online program, on July 9, that revisits memorable moments from previous seasons. Especially notable

is Mira Nadon's generous, assured turn as the female lead in George Balanchine's "Scotch Symphony," in 2017. (Nadon, now at N.Y.C.B., is still one to watch.) The students also dance "In Creases," Justin Peck's first ballet for N.Y.C.B., in a performance from 2018.—*M.H. (sab.org)*

Tap City

The New York City Tap Festival celebrates its twentieth year by moving the festivities online. The events, all free, begin on July 6, with a virtual version of the annual Copasetic Boat Ride, a gathering and tap jam hosted, this time around, by the affable DeWitt Fleming, Jr. On July 10, the festival goes retrospective, presenting a collection of works from the past five years of "Rhythm in Motion," its vital incubator for tap choreography. And, on July 11, "Tap It Out," its mass-ensemble project, usually performed outside, amasses in cyberspace.—*B.S. (atdf.org/events)*

TELEVISION

Taste the Nation

Padma Lakshmi, the star of this new series (on Hulu), refers to the United States as a "melting pot of cuisines," but the show makes a case, inherently, for the pluralistic salad bowl as a better metaphor. Its ten episodes amount to a cross-country foodways crawl. In South Carolina's Low Country, talk of the culture of crab fishing leads to a look at the precarious future of the Gullah people. In San Francisco, Lakshmi enlists the comedian Ali Wong to pursue the question "What is chop suey, anyway?"—an interrogation of how restaurateurs reworked a Chinese tradition to cater to Western taste buds. Chauffeured through Milwaukee in Oscar Mayer's Wienermobile, Lakshmi cruises into a brief on German-American history and learns how the sausage of identity is made. A gracious guest at a groaning smorgasbord, Lakshmi mmmms and ahs while paying homage to famous chefs and anonymous founts of nourishment alike. She takes a spoonful of Gullah red rice and apologizes to the viewer, saying, "I'm really sorry you can't eat this," but the succulence of the cinematography is sustenance enough.—*Troy Patterson*

ON TELEVISION



The bohemian Clancy is an earnest inquirer of the human condition. He is also pink, and the owner of an illegal simulator, shaped rather like a giant vagina, that facilitates his investigation of a psychedelic multiverse. "The Midnight Gospel" (on Netflix) is a truly original and truly bizarre collaboration between Pendleton Ward, the animation virtuoso behind "Adventure Time," and Duncan Trussell, the host of the "Duncan Trussell Family Hour" podcast and the voice of Clancy. In each episode, the philosopher-vagabond Clancy conducts a conversation with guests for his "spacecast" as they navigate mazes of trippy peril. In one episode, a tiny President, voiced by Dr. Drew Pinsky, protects Clancy from a zombie invasion as they discuss the moralization of drug-taking. In another, a wise bird in a Dantean jail teaches Clancy about Tibetan Buddhism, and about death as "the relinquishing of the self." The contrast between substance and image bombards the viewer delightfully; watching the show is like skimming Schopenhauer with a tab on your tongue.—*Doreen St. Félix*

MOVIES

The Long Gray Line

Set almost entirely on the grounds of West Point, John Ford's 1955 bio-pic about the longtime officer Marty Maher is one of his grandest and heartiest films. Tyrone Power stars as Maher, a pugnacious immigrant from Ireland who proves ludicrously incompetent as a waiter. Maher enlists in the Army and is laughably inept as a West Point boxing instructor, too. But, with a heart of gold and a vast reserve of wisdom, he serves as a sort of secular priest to generations of cadets throughout his fifty-year tenure, which spans both the First and the Second World War and involves the duties and the devastations of combat. Ford presents the academy, with its rich and rigid traditions, as a military monastery



The Portuguese director **Miguel Gomes**, who has daringly fused documentary and fiction in his features “Our Beloved Month of August” and “Arabian Nights,” developed a template for this blend in four boldly imaginative short films from the early two-thousands. (They’re streaming on Lincoln Center’s Virtual Cinema.) “A Christmas Inventory” observes a multigenerational family’s jovial holiday feast while using macrophotography to evoke earnest consumerist joys—gaudy gift wrapping seemingly made to dance, a mechanical Spider-Man doll brought wondrously to life—alongside the playful piety of a tiny Nativity diorama. In “Canticle of All Creatures,” Gomes sketches the life and the teachings of St. Francis in three brief, bold segments. A mischievous nonfiction scene of an itinerant singer’s wanderings through the tourist center of Assisi is followed by a highly stylized dramatization of the friar’s mystical discussions with St. Clare. A concluding, ecstatic sequence examines, with scientific intimacy, some of the small animals that Francis loved, and, in a voice-over featuring children’s recitations, envisions this innocent passion as a revolutionary plot.—*Richard Brody*

where rituals and pageantry foster love along with discipline. The film’s soul-stirring comedy is centered on family—Maher’s courtship of the quick-witted Mary O’Donnell (Maureen O’Hara), another Irish immigrant, and the arrival of his father (Donald Crisp), whose folklore embodies the stern principles and independent spirit that also underlie Maher’s force of character.—*Richard Brody* (*Streaming on Amazon, Google Play, and other services.*)

Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property

Charles Burnett combines nonfiction, fiction, and metafiction in this ardently analytical examination, from 2003, of the life and legacy of Nat Turner, who led a rebellion of enslaved people in Virginia in 1831 and was captured and executed that year. The premise of the movie—as declared in voice-over narration spoken by Alfre Woodard—is the failure of the United States to confront the history of

slavery and white supremacy. Burnett dramatizes scenes from the scant historical record of Turner, while also exploring it in interviews with scholars and artists (including Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Mary Kemp Davis, and Ossie Davis). He also considers and dramatizes various versions of Turner’s life, by both black creators, including William Wells Brown and Randolph Edmonds, and white ones (such as Thomas R. Gray’s “Confessions of Nat Turner,” based on his interview with the jailed leader, and William Styron’s 1967 novel of the same title). Burnett is shown directing these scenes; speaking on camera about his effort to channel their views of Turner, he probes the troubling depths of the politics of art.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Amazon Prime and Kanopy.*)

Red Hook Summer

Spike Lee’s low-budget return to Brooklyn, from 2012, is among his most visionary works. It’s the story of thirteen-year-old Silas (Jules

Brown), who calls himself Flik, an Atlanta teen-ager who comes to Brooklyn to spend the summer with his grandfather (Clarke Peters), the minister of a small Red Hook church, whose traditional ways Flik rejects. Flik’s fast friendship with Chazz (Toni Lyssaith), the daughter of a parishioner, offers a sweet, yet strong, depiction of adolescent tenderness amid the film’s turbulent family stories. The drama of Flik’s cynicism yielding to discovery parallels another one, of faith yielding to reason, when a former congregant revisits the church and offers a startling revelation. Lee fills the movie with fervent musical interludes, lyrical asides, and bitter conflicts; he brings long-standing frustrations to light and plants the characters firmly within the turbulent course of history—while also dramatizing, through Flik’s hobby of videography, the infusion of image-making with a higher purpose.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Amazon Prime, iTunes, and other services.*)

The Truth

The Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda, working for the first time in France, tells the tale of Fabienne (Catherine Deneuve), a celebrated actress who has stopped at nothing in the pursuit of her art. If her family has been damaged along the way, she has yet to be stricken with remorse. Residing in her stately house in Paris, she is visited by her daughter, Lumir (Juliette Binoche), who brings along her American husband, Hank (Ethan Hawke). They have a young daughter, Charlotte (Clémentine Grenier), who, understandably, ascribes witchlike powers to her grandmother. By Kore-eda’s high standard, the narrative feels a little too neatly wrapped; Fabienne, for instance, is currently starring in a science-fiction film about mothers and daughters. But the mood of the movie is graceful and gilded with wit, and Deneuve, glancing at her own career, is at her most magisterial. In French and English.—*Anthony Lane* (*Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.*)

You Are Not I

This featurette by Sara Driver, from 1981—an adaptation of a story by Paul Bowles—is a frank and piercingly intimate reckoning with mental illness. Suzanne Fletcher plays Ethel, a young woman who, while wandering beyond the gates of the hospital in which she’s being treated, happens upon a deadly car accident. Mistaken for one of its survivors, she’s taken to the home of her sister (Melody Schneider), whose fear of Ethel’s delusional and dissociated behavior is the spark of the drama. The taut stillness of Driver’s images (the cinematography is by Jim Jarmusch) captures Ethel’s states of mind from both the inside and the outside, emphasizing the masklike chill of Fletcher’s performance and the quiet alienations of a world that appears, to Ethel, out of whack. With a voice-over that details Ethel’s overdone logic and a quietly nerve-jangling score by Phil Kline, Driver conjures vast spans of harrowing experience in infinitesimal gestures.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel.*)

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

IMPORTANT FACTS

The information below does not take the place of talking with your healthcare professional. Only your healthcare professional knows the specifics of your condition and how OPDIVO® (nivolumab) in combination with YERVOY® (ipilimumab) may fit into your overall therapy. Talk to your healthcare professional if you have any questions about OPDIVO (pronounced op-DEE-voh) and YERVOY (pronounced yur-voi).

Rx ONLY

What is the most important information I should know about OPDIVO (nivolumab) and YERVOY (ipilimumab)?

OPDIVO and YERVOY are medicines that may treat certain cancers by working with your immune system. OPDIVO and YERVOY can cause your immune system to attack normal organs and tissues in any area of your body and can affect the way they work. These problems can sometimes become serious or life-threatening and can lead to death and may happen anytime during treatment or even after your treatment has ended. Some of these problems may happen more often when OPDIVO is used in combination with YERVOY. YERVOY can cause serious side effects in many parts of your body which can lead to death. These problems may happen anytime during treatment with YERVOY or after you have completed treatment.

Call or see your healthcare provider right away if you develop any symptoms of the following problems or these symptoms get worse. Do not try to treat symptoms yourself.

Lung problems (pneumonitis). Symptoms of pneumonitis may include:

- new or worsening cough
- chest pain
- shortness of breath

Intestinal problems (colitis) that can lead to tears or holes in your intestine. Signs and symptoms of colitis may include:

- diarrhea (loose stools) or more bowel movements than usual
- mucus or blood in your stools or dark, tarry, sticky stools
- stomach-area (abdomen) pain or tenderness
- you may or may not have fever

Liver problems (hepatitis) that can lead to liver failure.

Signs and symptoms of hepatitis may include:

- yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes
- nausea or vomiting
- pain on the right side of your stomach area (abdomen)
- drowsiness
- dark urine (tea colored)
- bleeding or bruising more easily than normal
- feeling less hungry than usual
- decreased energy

Hormone gland problems (especially the thyroid, pituitary, and adrenal glands; and pancreas). Signs and symptoms that your hormone glands are not working properly may include:

- headaches that will not go away or unusual headaches
- extreme tiredness or unusual sluggishness
- weight gain or weight loss
- dizziness or fainting
- changes in mood or behavior, such as decreased sex drive, irritability, or forgetfulness
- hair loss
- feeling cold
- constipation
- voice gets deeper
- excessive thirst or lots of urine

Kidney problems, including nephritis and kidney failure.

Signs of kidney problems may include:

- decrease in the amount of urine
- blood in your urine
- swelling in your ankles
- loss of appetite

Skin Problems. Signs of these problems may include:

- skin rash with or without itching
- itching
- skin blistering or peeling
- sores or ulcers in mouth or other mucous membranes

Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis). Signs and symptoms of encephalitis may include:

- headache
- fever
- tiredness or weakness
- confusion
- memory problems
- sleepiness
- seeing or hearing things that are not really there (hallucinations)
- seizures
- stiff neck

Problems in other organs. Signs of these problems may include:

- changes in eyesight
- severe or persistent muscle or joint pains
- severe muscle weakness
- chest pain

Additional serious side effects observed during a separate study of YERVOY (ipilimumab) alone include:

Nerve problems that can lead to paralysis. Symptoms of nerve problems may include:

- unusual weakness of legs, arms, or face
- numbness or tingling in hands or feet

Eye problems. Symptoms may include:

- blurry vision, double vision, or other vision problems
- eye pain or redness

Get medical help immediately if you develop any of these symptoms or they get worse. It may keep these problems from becoming more serious. Your healthcare team will check you for side effects during treatment and may treat you with corticosteroid or hormone replacement medicines. If you have a serious side effect, your healthcare team may also need to delay or completely stop your treatment with OPDIVO (nivolumab) and YERVOY.

What are OPDIVO and YERVOY?

OPDIVO and YERVOY are prescription medicines used to treat adults with a type of advanced stage lung cancer called non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). OPDIVO may be used in combination with YERVOY as your first treatment for NSCLC:

- when your lung cancer has spread to other parts of your body (metastatic), and
- your tumors are positive for PD-L1, but do not have an abnormal EGFR or ALK gene.

It is not known if OPDIVO and YERVOY are safe and effective when used in children younger than 18 years of age.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before receiving OPDIVO and YERVOY?

Before you receive OPDIVO and YERVOY, tell your healthcare provider if you:

- have immune system problems (autoimmune disease) such as Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, lupus, or sarcoidosis
- have had an organ transplant
- have lung or breathing problems
- have liver problems
- have any other medical conditions
- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. OPDIVO and YERVOY can harm your unborn baby. **Females who are able to become pregnant:**

Your healthcare provider should do a pregnancy test before you start receiving OPDIVO and YERVOY.

- You should use an effective method of birth control during and for at least 5 months after the last dose. Talk to your healthcare provider about birth control methods that you can use during this time.

- Tell your healthcare provider right away if you become pregnant or think you are pregnant during treatment. You or your healthcare provider should contact Bristol Myers Squibb at 1-800-721-5072 as soon as you become aware of the pregnancy.

- **Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study:** Females who become pregnant during treatment with YERVOY (ipilimumab) are encouraged to enroll in a Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study. The purpose of this study is to collect information about the health of you and your baby. You or your healthcare provider can enroll in the Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study by calling 1-844-593-7869.

- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if OPDIVO (nivolumab) or YERVOY passes into your breast milk. **Do not** breastfeed during treatment and for 5 months after the last dose.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

Know the medicines you take. Keep a list of them to show your healthcare providers and pharmacist when you get a new medicine.

What are the possible side effects of OPDIVO and YERVOY? OPDIVO and YERVOY can cause serious side effects, including:

- See "What is the most important information I should know about OPDIVO and YERVOY?"
- **Severe infusion reactions.** Tell your doctor or nurse right away if you get these symptoms during an infusion of OPDIVO or YERVOY:
 - chills or shaking
 - dizziness
 - itching or rash
 - fever
 - flushing
 - feeling like passing out
 - difficulty breathing

The most common side effects of OPDIVO when used in combination with YERVOY include:

- feeling tired
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- stomach-area (abdominal) pain
- rash
- shortness of breath
- itching
- upper respiratory tract infection
- nausea
- headache
- pain in muscles, bones, and joints
- low thyroid hormone levels (hypothyroidism)
- fever
- decreased weight
- cough
- dizziness
- decreased appetite

These are not all the possible side effects of OPDIVO and YERVOY. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

This is a brief summary of the most important information about OPDIVO and YERVOY. For more information, talk with your healthcare provider, call 1-855-673-4861, or go to www.OPDIVO.com.

Manufactured by:
Bristol-Myers Squibb Company
Princeton, New Jersey 08543 USA

 **Bristol Myers Squibb™**



TABLES FOR TWO

Foraged Foods

"A lot of the talk about quarantine cooking, in the beginning, was, like, 'Here's twenty ways to use a can of tuna,'" James O'Donnell recounted the other day. "It was very much survivalist." O'Donnell and his partner, Amanda Kingsley, own Allora Farm & Flowers, in Pine Plains, New York, where they grow what they need for their floral-design studio, plus vegetables. It struck him that "a lot of people at home could probably use feeling connected to the natural world right now, a little bit of excitement and wonder." Before the pandemic, a substantial part of O'Donnell and Kingsley's business was supplying restaurants with ingredients that they foraged sustainably from the acres that they lease, as well as from friends' properties and from public lands in the Hudson Valley and on Long Island. With the restaurant market shrinking, they decided to experiment with a direct-to-consumer weekly-ish Wild Box, available for delivery in the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens.

To forage safely requires a good amount of training. Perfectly edible

plants can look nearly identical to perfectly poisonous ones. In some cases, a berry that grows on a tree may be as palatable as its flower is lethal. Still, eating my way through a Wild Box gave me hope for my chances of surviving should even the canned tuna run out. Learn the rules—many inherited from indigenous peoples—and unlock access to treasures hiding in plain sight in thickets, on riverbanks, and by the shore. A hefty wedge of chicken-of-the-woods mushroom pried from a tree trunk performed exactly as its name would suggest, its edges pan-frying to a crisp golden brown that rivalled a buttermilk crust, its creamy interior shredding almost like meat.

A vial of sassafras syrup, made by steeping bark and small roots removed responsibly from a sassafras tree, was transformed into an aromatically fizzy glass of root beer when mixed with soda water. The detailed ingredient key that came in the box suggested treating tender, sweet, snappy sea beans—a succulent, also known as samphire, that grows on beaches and in coastal marshes—like salad greens, but to leave the salt out of your vinaigrette until you had tasted the dressed beans. Sure enough, they were so infused with a natural brine that they didn't need a single grain.

As instructed, I chopped a few stems of henbit—a wild herb in the mint family, identifiable by its square stalk and tiny purple flowers—and mixed it into beaten pheasant eggs for an omelette. The eggs were from a tiny Brooklyn restaurant called Honey Badger, run

by Fjolla Sheholli and Junayd Juman. Before the pandemic, the couple served an elaborate tasting menu. Now they offer a version to go, plus meal kits, pantry items, and a "curated market basket," all with an emphasis on foraged items; Sheholli, who spent much of her childhood learning the land around her grandmother's farm, in Kosovo, is a skilled forager who gathers ingredients outside the city on a weekly basis. The eggs had been laid on an oxymoronically named wild-game farm upstate, but my market basket also included an assortment of uncultivated flora that Sheholli had hand-collected: a small bouquet of red clover, which I brewed into a subtle tea; a few sprigs of wild bay leaf; a generous bunch of common vetch, or wild peas, which bore wispy tendrils and tiny pods.

Though there is much that is technically edible growing in the parks, medians, and other patches of greenery in the five boroughs, Sheholli does not recommend foraging from them; there could be lead, or worse, in the soil. But she and Juman, who have long supported the local community—during the pandemic, by delivering food to elders—have no intention of slowing down in their mission to, as she puts it, "shorten the supply chain." Every week, she will forage, and, as soon as they can, the couple will serve their food on Brooklyn's most natural landscape: the sidewalk. (*Allora Wild Box* \$45; *Honey Badger* market basket from \$65.)

—Hannah Goldfield

"[A] POWERFUL TRIBUTE TO THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE."

—New York Times Book Review



"POWERFUL, VITAL, AND EXQUISITELY
AND STUNNINGLY ILLUSTRATED."

—Vogue.com

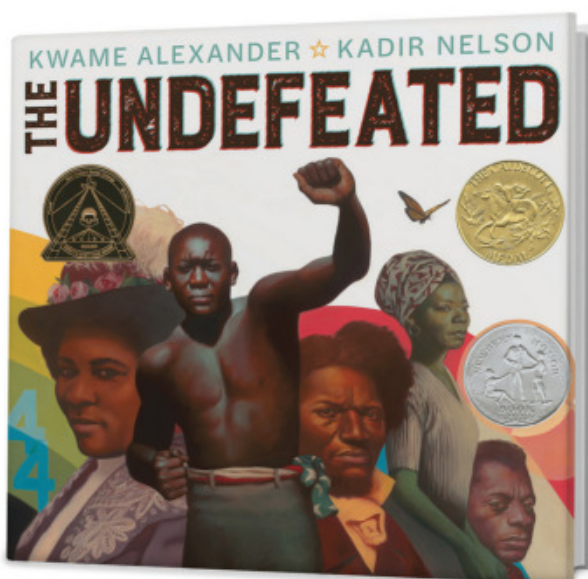
"AN EXUBERANT POEM CELEBRATING
THE LIVES OF BLACK AMERICANS."

—Jacqueline Woodson, for Oprah.com

CALDECOTT
MEDAL WINNER

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER

FIVE STARRED
REVIEWS



CORETTA SCOTT
KING ILLUSTRATOR
AWARD WINNER

NEWBERY
HONOR BOOK

NATIONAL BOOK
AWARD LONGLIST

AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT THE SHIFTING PANDEMIC

Since the coronavirus first took hold in this country, Donald Trump has heedlessly promoted the idea that it can be treated solely as a political, or even a cultural, problem. Part of the tragedy of the pandemic is that, until now, many people in less affected areas of the United States believed him. In a speech last week to thousands of mostly maskless young supporters in a megachurch in Phoenix, Trump claimed that Democrats are “trying to do their best to keep the country shut down”—not to fight COVID-19 but to sabotage the economy, and thus his electoral prospects. They’re also trying to “rig” the election by means of “the China virus.” He called the disease other names, including the more blatantly racist Kung Flu (it’s not a flu), and professed to find its real name “odd”: “I said, ‘What’s the nineteen?’” (The virus was identified in 2019, but the notion that there were eighteen previous COVIDs figures in certain conspiracy theories.) Most fantastically, Trump spoke of the pandemic as if it were a thing of the past, even as the number of new cases rose, last week, to horrific levels, particularly in Texas, Florida, California, and Arizona. Last Friday alone, the U.S. saw more than forty thousand new cases.

At a congressional hearing on Tuesday, Dr. Anthony Fauci, of the National Institutes of Health, said that trends this summer will produce a “baseline” for determining how severe a second wave may be in the fall and winter, and whether the country can rely on containment measures or will have to resort to an-

other round of widespread closures of businesses and schools. The shifting of the epicenter of the pandemic from Northeastern, Midwestern, and urban areas that are largely governed by Democrats to states in the South and the West, many of them red or purple, along with blue California, is a reminder of a point that Dr. Ashish Jha, a Harvard public-health expert, has been making since March: the coronavirus doesn’t care whether you’re a Republican or a Democrat. Nationally, the number of deaths has fallen, thanks in part to new insights about treatments. But the rising numbers of cases, coupled with the listlessness of the Administration, suggest that the respite may be brief, and that we are squandering whatever advantage was gained by the ebb in the states first affected.

The political leaders in New York, the worst-hit state, unquestionably made mistakes. But the political geography of

the pandemic’s early course seems to have lured some Republican politicians into complacency, as if a MAGA cap could be a protective talisman, or as if, when it comes to COVID-19, bad things could happen only to subway-riding city dwellers. Some even acted as if the virus’s depredations could be tolerated as long as they fell most heavily on low-income, elderly, or marginalized people. Those tendencies have served their states badly, and the country, too. Senator Mitch McConnell’s statement, in April, putting coronavirus-relief packages in the category of “blue-state bailouts” provided one milestone in the G.O.P. response; the recent effort of Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis, to downplay his state’s staggering number of new cases—nearly nine thousand on a single day last week—by pointing to infections among “overwhelmingly Hispanic workers and day laborers” was another.

Community leaders in Florida reacted to DeSantis’s remarks with anger, particularly since the Governor had not answered calls for protections for agricultural workers. His rationales for pushing ahead with the state’s reopening, which had already been rushed, have been growing frantic. DeSantis had until recently persisted in arguing that the high numbers are a statistical illusion produced by more testing. Trump is still making that claim. At his now infamous rally in Tulsa, he said that he’d told his team to cut back on testing; he and a spokesperson disagree about whether that was a joke. In truth, while there has been an expansion in testing, it is not nearly enough to account for the recent spikes. People in Arizona, Florida, and Texas have been



waiting for hours at testing stations that cannot keep up with the demand; meanwhile, the Administration has announced that it will end federal funding for thirteen such sites across five states.

There are now more than five thousand new COVID cases a day in Texas, and last week Governor Greg Abbott announced a pause in that state's rapid reopening in an attempt to "corral" the virus, and ordered bars and restaurants to limit service. But that effort is being hampered by an executive order that he issued in April, preventing local authorities from enforcing a mandate for individuals to use masks. Some hospitals in the state, meanwhile, are nearing I.C.U. capacity. Adults are being admitted to Texas Children's Hospital, in Houston, to provide space for COVID patients in other facilities.

That is an ominous echo of the early situation in New York City, where at the

peak eight hundred deaths were attributed to COVID in a single day; one of the lessons that emerged from that crucible is that people who might be saved die when hospitals are too crowded. (Another lesson: wearing masks in public works.) There are similar indications that I.C.U.s are at risk of reaching capacity in Arizona and Alabama, and soon may be in Florida and the Carolinas, too. Roy Cooper, the Democratic governor of North Carolina, rejected Trump's demand that the Republican National Convention, scheduled to take place in Charlotte, be held without social distancing; at DeSantis's invitation, Trump will now accept the nomination in Jacksonville, Florida.

There is something frighteningly sad about the fact that many Republican leaders may stop seeing the pandemic through the lens of Trumpism only when the virus starts hitting more of their con-

stituents. Trump himself won't change; he used his trip to Phoenix as an occasion to inspect a new piece of border wall, and, at the rally, he talked about its beauty and claimed that California was secretly begging him to build more of it as, somehow, a way to stop the virus. As he spoke, you could hear him trying to jam the pandemic into the nativist, xenophobic rhetorical framework that helped him get elected in 2016.

But politics means accountability, too. Between now and November, politicians in many states will need to decide where their responsibility lies: in heeding Trump, or in listening to the desperate doctors who tell them that they are running out of hospital beds. More than a hundred and twenty thousand people in America have died already, and the reckoning is far from over.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

DEPT. OF PYROTECHNICS THE BOOM



Last week, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, a thin man in a white T-shirt and a wide-brimmed Chicago Bulls cap proudly popped the trunk of his Chevy Malibu. Inside, there were Golden Willows, Chain Reactions, Parachute Battalions, and Mini Artillery Shells—dozens of colorful boxes, one of them labelled "For Daytime Use!" This was what remained of the twelve hundred dollars' worth of fireworks that the man, who asked not to be named, had purchased during a visit to Keystone Fireworks, in Pennsylvania, and then sold, for more than double the price, around Brooklyn. (Fireworks are illegal in New York State.) He takes calls for deliveries from regular customers, or parks on a busy street and does business, out of his car, with whoever stops by. "People have always done fireworks," he said, "but they're going harder than ever this year. They can't wait to come outside."

A few blocks over, a group of young men, probably in their twenties, launched a several-minutes-long blitz. They took turns darting from the sidewalk into the

street to light streams of Roman candles, which they topped off with five-hundred-gram "cakes": the largest firework that can be legally used without a federal explosives permit. People watched from their apartment buildings. One neighbor leaned out his window and begged the group to stop; the fireworks were scaring his dog. "Fuck your dog!" one of the men yelled back at him. "We will shoot these shits at your house!" Moments later, a cop car rolled up, and the group retreated.

For the past two weeks in Brooklyn, the sight—and deafening sound—of fireworks exploding has become as much a fact of daily life as the Black Lives Matter protests and the 7 P.M. cheer for essential workers. Big fireworks sellers such as Keystone are seeing increased demand; Kevin Shaub, the chain's co-owner, said that when his stores, which had been closed since mid-March, finally reopened, a few weeks ago, customers came flooding in. "People haven't had any entertainment for a long time," Shaub said. "They've had to delay weddings, graduations, and birthdays." A lot of these fireworks have ended up in New York City. People bought troves from street vendors in early June, and then, instead of saving them for the Fourth of July—as they normally would—set them all off on weekends, or on Juneteenth, or on a random Tuesday. And then they came back to buy more. "The money's good," the

man in the Bulls cap said. This year, he sold in two days what would have normally taken him two weeks.

His fireworks aren't cheap; the fanciest ones in his trunk go for two hundred bucks. So most of his customers are adults—"people with money," he said—rather than teen-agers. Nearly all of them are men. They tend to be in their late twenties or thirties, and sometimes, if they're buying fireworks before the sun has set, they bring their kids with them. That night, the man gestured around at the neighborhood, which was coming off a four-month lockdown. "They're celebrating," he said of the people setting off the fireworks. "It's definitely about freedom."

There have been several injuries: a man was hospitalized after lighting a firework that shot out the wrong end, and last week, a three-year-old was burned by one that came through his bedroom window. Mayor Bill de Blasio has announced a "huge sting operation to go and get these illegal fireworks at the base." In response to recent calls about illegal fireworks in Flatbush, dozens of N.Y.P.D. officers showed up in riot gear.

But, hours after the Mayor's announcement, the man was back in Crown Heights, selling his supply. Later, he stopped by to see his cousin, a middle-aged woman who lives in the area. She has been setting off fireworks, too, and she had a different theory about why there

have been so many lately. “I think it’s about the killing,” she said, referring to the recent death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis cops. She considers the fireworks to be another form of protest against the police. “People are angry.”

On social media, theories of a psyop have circulated: the police are setting off and distributing fireworks, people argue, in order to deprive protesters of sleep, or to stoke tension and make law enforcement seem indispensable. A video has gone viral of firefighters appearing to set off fireworks in Crown Heights. (The F.D.N.Y. is investigating.) The man was vaguely aware of these theories, but they didn’t seem to carry a lot of weight with him. “I hope not” was all he had to say when asked if he thought police were shooting off fireworks. “We don’t need any more drama around here.”

—Anna Boots

WELL-TURNED-OUT DEPT. HOUSEHOLD NAME



On a recent Friday, the British actor Bill Nighy, answering a FaceTime call in his “kitchen-cum-front-room, at home, in England,” stood up to pause the music he was listening to: a song by the twenty-one-year-old singer-songwriter Rachel Chinouriri. “I found her in a Shazam, in a shop,” he said. He’d added her to a playlist he’d made, which included Alicia Keys, D’Angelo, and Mary J. Blige. “There aren’t that many people who make your heart go boom,” he said. “Mary J. Blige is one of them.” Nighy, who is seventy, wore eyeglasses, a navy V-neck sweater—“I used to be a bit squeamish about V-neck jumpers, but I’m much more relaxed now; they have to be very small and they have to be neat and they have to be navy blue”—and a white button-down shirt. “I had nothing but blue shirts, so I made a conscious decision to get out of that trap,” he said. “The look is—I suppose we’re going for a well-turned-out librarian. Librarian chic.”

Nighy plays a music-loving Merseyside tailor in the movie “Sometimes Always Never,” just released in the U.S. “I got to work in progressive modernist

knitwear that I wouldn’t normally have the courage to wear in real life,” he said. “And when I met Carl Hunter and Roy Boulter”—the director and a producer—“I liked the look of them, not least because they were both wearing very discreet modernist brands.” He also liked the script, by Frank Cottrell Boyce. “It involved a certain sort of ironic delivery, which is something I’m drawn to.” As the film begins, his character, Alan, reunites with his son, Peter (Sam Riley), from whom he became estranged after the disappearance of his other son, Michael, who ran away years before, mid-Scrabble game. They’re looking for answers. As the plot unfolds, grudging British bonding occurs, and Alan seduces a married retiree, Scrabble-hustles an opponent with words like “MUZJIKS,” and teaches his grandson to wear a suit. The film itself has a certain ironic delivery—a stylized, whimsical aesthetic, with a mood of comic melancholy.

In creating dialogue, Nighy said, Boyce would sometimes “YouTube me, find out stuff I’d said in real life, and put it in the script”: a pro-Marmite riff from a red-carpet interview; a definitive pronouncement on suit-jacket buttoning. When buttoning a three-button jacket, Nighy explained, it’s sometimes for the top one, always for the middle, and never for the bottom. “If you meet a man with the bottom button done up, call a cab. He’s not currently functioning—you shouldn’t be breathing the same air.”

“Sometimes Always Never” is set in Liverpool—the site of Nighy’s first professional acting gig. He grew up in Surrey; as a struggling actor, he sold women’s clothing at a stall in an old-time market. (“I was opposite the egg man. It was the summer where all the girls wore cheesecloth, the long wraparound skirts. I put the skirts on in order to advertise, and the egg man treated me with disdain. I used to sell a lot of cheesecloth.”) Then he was hired by the Everyman Theatre Company, in Liverpool, where he acted alongside Julie Walters and Pete Postlethwaite. “I went to Liverpool in nineteen whatever the fuck”—1974—“and walked into what was, forty years later, described to me by an interviewer as ‘the forefront of British political theatre.’ I said, ‘Really? I thought it was us just bundled into the back of a van, playing prisons and bookstores and pubs.’”



Bill Nighy

At fifty-three, Nighy became a household name for his role in “Love Actually.” He played Billy Mack, a joyfully dissolute pop icon in an open-collared getup. Then he appeared in two “Pirates of the Caribbean” movies, as the dastardly Davy Jones, who has a cephalopod for a face. “People say, ‘You’re that bloke—you’re the squid man!’” he said. (He once visited his friend Lauren Bacall for breakfast and inadvertently terrified her grandsons. “Their mum went to the bedroom and said, ‘Boys, come out—Davy Jones is in the kitchen!’ So they locked the door. Like, ‘Are you insane?’”) Yet widespread recognition has its limits. Last year, after presenting an award at the BAFTAs, Nighy said, “I walked in the darkness of the backstage, and there was Mary J. Blige. I went up to her and said, ‘You’re an inspiration to me. I listen to your music every day. Thank you.’ She just looked at me—no idea.” Why didn’t he mention “Pirates”? He laughed. “I’m the squid man, come on!”

—Sarah Larson

DEPT. OF RENOVATIONS NEW VIEWS



When Jacqueline Kennedy arrived at the White House, in 1961, she hired a French decorator, who helped her fill the place with European antiques and fine art. Many Americans were

perturbed. (Clement Conger, the famous White House curator, reportedly thought that it looked “too Frenchified.”) There was one addition that seemed patriotic; Kennedy installed, in the Diplomatic Reception Room, a nineteenth-century panoramic wallpaper that depicted scenes from American history: ships unloading at Boston Harbor, a stagecoach driving under the Natural Bridge, military cadets forming a procession at West Point. But even the wallpaper was French—it was called “Les Vues d’Amérique du Nord” and was designed for Zuber et Cie, by an artist named Jean-Julien Deltil, who had likely never visited America. “Vues” still hangs in the White House, although it now shares a room with a rug, designed by the current First Lady, Melania Trump, that displays the official flower of each state. It can also be found at upscale places such as the Acorn Club, in Philadelphia, and the Greenbrier resort, in West Virginia.

Since 1929, “Vues” has also covered some of the walls on the seventh floor of the Spence School, an all-girls K-12 institution on the Upper East Side. Many students (including Gwyneth Paltrow, Kerry Washington, and Jackie Kennedy’s cousin Edith Beale) and faculty (including Soon-Yi Previn, who was once a student teacher there) have passed the painted scenes on their way to class. Spence takes great pride in “Vues,” which is printed with centuries-old hand-carved blocks that have been declared *monuments historiques* in France. “When students would give tours to prospective parents, they were always told to highlight the fact that we had this wallpaper,” a recent alumna recalled. But, about two weeks ago, an Instagram account called @blackspencespeaks highlighted the wallpaper in a different way, citing it as an example of systemic racism at the school.

The wallpaper’s Boston Harbor scene includes a multiracial crowd hanging out on the docks; its depiction of the Natural Bridge shows indigenous people dancing for an audience of black and white men and women who are dressed in finery. The paper is historic, but not historically accurate. The alumnae who run the @blackspencespeaks account believe that it also “glorifies the trans-Atlantic slave trade and abuse of Indigenous peoples.”

“Vues” has long been a subject of internal discussion at Spence. The @black-

spencespeaks account has made this conversation public. (It has also publicized other racist incidents at the school, such as black and brown students being mistaken for one another, and their parents being mistaken for nannies.) In an early post, a current student recalled a heated classroom debate over the wallpaper. “The only other black girl in the class and myself had to single handedly fend off everyone telling us how to feel,” she wrote, adding, “The abuse of my people is nothing I would ever want to see on the walls of my school.” In another post, a former school employee referred to the wallpaper as “the Confederate statue of Spence.”

Robert Emlen, a former curator for Brown University, which has a version of “Vues” hanging in a building on its own campus, described the wallpaper’s depictions of black wealth and interracial mingling as a “rose-colored view of life in Jacksonian America,” and a product of a time when the French tended to romanticize the country. (It was the era of Alexis de Tocqueville’s “Democracy in America.”) According to Emlen, Deltil’s portrayal of African-Americans might be wrong, but “gives no suggestion of malice.” However, a young black woman who graduated from Spence in 2019 said that the work is a dangerous revision of history—one that reinforces the bad habits of her white peers. “Having that false history portrayed perpetuates what they want to believe,” she said the other day. “They want to believe that, because we’re here with them, racism has disappeared, and that we don’t struggle as much. But we do.”

Students at Brown recently called for the removal of “Vues” from their campus, and some faculty responded by installing plastic screens over the panels depicting black and brown figures; passersby are invited to leave notes commenting on the images. When Spence convened a committee, in 2018, to discuss what to do with its “Vues,” it landed on a similar solution, and, for a period, the wallpaper was covered by faculty- and staff-made art projects. Several months later, those projects were taken down.

On June 13th, the @blackspencespeaks account published a list of demands for the school’s leadership, in order to address racism at the institution. The group members did not ask for the removal of the wallpaper, because

they assumed that the idea would be a non-starter. (A 2019 alumna who served on the earlier committee recalled that the discussion was always “framed in a way where the wallpaper wasn’t going to be taken down, so we had to find a different way to solve the issue.”) Instead, they asked that the school install another art exhibition over the paper.

Last week, they got a response. Spence announced that the wallpaper would be removed entirely. “Infused by the many stories of how this wallpaper continues to isolate, separate and deny belonging at Spence for our Black and Brown community members, The Board of Trustees has decided to remove the wallpaper permanently,” the school wrote in a statement. The alumna who served on the earlier committee was shocked. “The pressure finally got to them,” she said.

Another alumna, who graduated in 2016, said, “We have other things we want. This is motivating me to push for those things. Because it’s attainable. All things can happen with time.”

—Rumaan Alam

GOLDENDALE POSTCARD PROPER AIR



Janece Smith is an agent at Klickitat Valley Realty, in Goldendale, Washington, about three hours southeast of the six-block strip, in Seattle, that protesters have called the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone. According to Smith’s Web site, she sells “property to retreat to from the metropolitan cities like Portland, Vancouver, Seattle, Tri-cities and other areas in Washington and Oregon.” She refers to this as “doomsday-prepper land.” Business is always good for Smith in times of calamity. When the pandemic arrived (the first confirmed case of COVID in the U.S. was in Washington State, in January), she was getting several inquiries a day. Then “police lost control of the cities,” she said, referring to the protests in response to the killings of unarmed black people, and now “interest is off the charts.” Nearly all her customers mention the coronavirus and civil unrest. She recently finalized a deal: twenty



acres for fifty-seven thousand dollars. “It doesn’t matter who you talk to,” she said, noting that lawyers, doctors, a former White House official, and a Google employee had all contacted her. “Even people who won’t wear a mask, who think the government is trying to take your rights away.” In the end, she said, “they’ll go”—to a secluded cabin, a bunker, or another hideout of their choice.

The other day, Smith was preparing to show a visitor some land that was available for purchase. “Normally, there’s a chainsaw back here,” she said, leaning over the bed of her Ford F-150. She was taking inventory of her truck before heading to the property, which was fifteen miles away from her already remote realty office. Smith, who is forty-three and has hair down to her waist, wore an ivory choker and a camo-print shirt. Before she became a real-estate agent, in 2006, she was a horse dealer. (“I moved to Golddendale because I’d had enough of the crooked horse industry.”) What kinds of things do her customers want? She opened an e-mail from a new client, who was planning a “community-building de-

fensive homestead.” He wanted neighbors to be “at least a mile away.” Also, if possible, owner financing.

Smith continued to rifle through her supplies. “A bunch of chains,” she said. “Oils, tow straps for anchoring loads, a case of water.” She opened up her truck’s center console. “Neosporin. A few Old Timers, for gutting,” she said, removing a knife that had “a little remnant on it from something.” There was also jerky, toothpaste, C.B.D. oil, binoculars, dip, a solar-powered charger, and ammo for her sidearm. “Smith & Wesson .380 with the laser sight,” she said, unholstering it. “I’ve heard that ninety-two per cent of assailants walk away when you put the laser on them.” Equally important was her Garmin Rino 650 radio. “It has a chip in it that shows you the land parcels and who owns them,” she said. “Walkie-talkie capabilities, too. If you’re a prepper, you get one.” (She has her own bug-out spot: a pine cabin, an hour northeast, that sits on sixty acres.) Her visitor pointed out one item that seemed to be missing. “I don’t do the face mask,” Smith replied. “You need proper air.”

She drove down Highway 142, past hills peppered with volcanic rock, and ranches where roping steers roamed. (“No balls, and short horns,” Smith said, waving at them.) She turned onto a dead-end road, passing a rival agent’s sign. “That guy is eightysomething,” she said, “and I guarantee he’d hump a hill faster than you.” She reached a few dozen acres of land surrounded by evergreens, with the hulking white mass of Mt. Adams in the distance. “People have been buying here recently. They have ‘well witchers’ with welding rods come and find water underground. They get power with wind or sun or both.” She pointed to a small, prefab off-grid home: “This is the average prepper. Most aren’t in cabins or bunkers. They’ve got full pantries, though, like you wouldn’t believe—buckets of powdered milk and rice, deer they’ve had canned up for years. They’ve got their cows going, their chickens, their jerky, their go bags.” Back to the truck. She wanted to get home before dark. When she cranked the engine, she noticed that her gas tank was nearly empty.

—Charles Bethea

THE DOLLAR-STORE DEATHS

Discount chains are thriving. But what do they do to poor communities?

BY ALEC MACGILLIS



Since 2017, nearly fifty people have been killed at the two biggest chains.

When Jolanda Woods was growing up in North St. Louis, in the nineteen-seventies and early eighties, she and her friends would take the bus to the stores downtown, on Fourteenth Street, or on Cherokee Street, on the south side, or out to the River Roads Mall, in the inner suburb of Jennings. “This was a very merchant city,” Woods, who is fifty-four, told me. There were plenty of places to shop in her neighborhood, too, even as North St. Louis, a mostly black and working-class part of town, fell into economic decline. There was Perlmutter’s department store, where women bought pantyhose in bulk, Payless shoes, True Value hardware, and Schnucks grocery store.

Almost all these stores have disappeared. As St. Louis’s population has

dropped from eight hundred and fifty thousand, in the nineteen-fifties, to a little more than three hundred thousand, owing to suburban flight and deindustrialization, its downtown has withered. The River Roads Mall closed in 1995. North St. Louis is a devastated expanse of vacant lots and crumbling late-nineteenth-century brick buildings, their disrepair all the more dramatic for the opulence of their design. “This neighborhood has gone down,” Woods said. “Oh, my God, these houses.”

A new form of retail has moved into the void. The discount chains Family Dollar and Dollar General now have nearly forty stores in St. Louis and its immediate suburbs, about fifteen of them in North St. Louis. This is where the people who remain in the neigh-

borhood can buy detergent and toys and pet food and underwear and motor oil and flashlights and strollers and mops and drain cleaner and glassware and wind chimes and rakes and shoes and balloons and bath towels and condoms and winter coats.

The stores have some nonperishable and frozen foods, too, for people who can’t travel to the few discount grocery stores left in the area. Rudimentary provisions like these allowed the stores to remain open as “essential” businesses during the coronavirus shutdowns. “These stores are our little Wal-marts, our little Targets,” Darryl Gray, a local minister and civil-rights activist, told me. “It’s the stuff you won’t get at a grocery store, that you get at a Walmart—but we don’t have one.”

Three years ago, Jolanda Woods’s husband, Robert Woods, who was forty-two, began working at a Dollar General on Grand Boulevard, across from an abandoned grocery store. He and Jolanda had separated, but they stayed in touch over the years as Robert overcame a crack-cocaine addiction, got a job at the Salvation Army, was ordained as a minister, and became an informal counsellor to other men battling addiction. Dollar General paid a bit more than the Salvation Army, but he expressed anxiety about security problems at the store. Shoplifting was common, and occasionally there were even armed robberies. The store lacked a security guard, and it typically had only a couple of clerks on hand.

On November 1, 2018, Woods went to work on his day off, to fill in for an absent co-worker. Footage from a security camera shows a man entering the store just after 1 P.M., wearing a blue sweatshirt with the hood pulled up over a red cap, and holding a silver gun. He fired down the center aisle, hitting Woods in the back of the head. Then he pointed the gun at the cash register, before seeming to panic. He ran out of the store empty-handed. An ambulance arrived, but Woods was no longer breathing. After his body was removed, Dollar General remained open for several hours, before closing amid protests from local residents.

Woods’s murder was one of three homicides in six months at the two discount chains in the St. Louis area. On June 13th, a man and a woman started

arguing in a car in the parking lot of a Family Dollar on West Florissant Avenue, just outside the city line; he shot her once in the head, killing her. Less than a month after Woods's death, a sixty-five-year-old woman was shopping at the Family Dollar on St. Charles Rock Road when a seemingly mentally ill thirty-four-year-old woman grabbed steak knives from a shelf in the store and stabbed her to death.

The Gun Violence Archive, a Web site that uses local news reports and law-enforcement sources to tally crimes involving firearms, lists more than two hundred violent incidents involving guns at Family Dollar or Dollar General stores since the start of 2017, nearly fifty of which resulted in deaths. The incidents include carjackings in the parking lot, drug deals gone bad, and altercations inside stores. But a large number involve armed robberies in which workers or customers have been shot. Since the beginning of 2017, employees have been wounded in shootings or pistol-whippings in at least thirty-one robberies; in at least seven other incidents, employees have been killed. The violence has not let up in recent months, when requirements for customers to wear masks have made it harder for clerks to detect shoppers who are bent on robbery. In early May, a worker at a Family Dollar in Flint, Michigan, was fatally shot after refusing entry to a customer without a mask.

The number of incidents can be explained in part by the stores' ubiquity: there are now more than sixteen thousand Dollar Generals and nearly eight thousand Family Dollars in the United States, a fifty-per-cent increase in the past decade. (By comparison, Walmart has about forty-seven hundred stores in the U.S.) The stores are often in high-crime neighborhoods, where there simply aren't many other businesses for criminals to target. Routine gun violence has fallen sharply in prosperous cities around the country, but it has remained stubbornly high in many of the cities and towns where these stores predominate. The glowing signs of the discount chains have become indicators of neglect, markers of a geography of the places that the country has written off.

But these factors are not sufficient to explain the trend. The chains' owners have done little to maintain order in the

stores, which tend to be thinly staffed and exist in a state of physical disarray. In the nineteen-seventies, criminologists such as Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson argued that rising crime could be partly explained by changes in the social environment which lowered the risk of getting caught. That theory gained increasing acceptance in the decades that followed. "The likelihood of a crime occurring depends on three elements: a motivated offender, a vulnerable victim, and the absence of a capable guardian," the sociologist Patrick Sharkey wrote, in "Uneasy Peace," from 2018.

Another way of putting this is that crime is not inevitable. Robberies and killings that have taken place at dollar-store chains would not have necessarily happened elsewhere. "The idea that crime is sort of a Whack-a-Mole game, that if you just press here it'll move over here" is wrong, Richard Rosenfeld, a criminologist at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, told me. Making it harder to commit a crime doesn't just push crime elsewhere; it reduces it. "Crime is opportunistic," he said. "If there's no opportunity, there's no crime."

James Luther Turner left school in 1902, when he was eleven. His father had died in a wrestling accident, and Turner had to run his family's farm, in Macon County, Tennessee. He was successful and entrepreneurial, and when he was twenty-four other farmers asked him to manage the local co-op; he started a bridge shop behind the store. Eventually, he took a job working for a Nashville drygoods wholesaler, hawking samples across southern Kentucky and middle Tennessee. In 1929, at the onset of the Depression, he opened a store in Scottsville, a small town in Kentucky. He bought up failed retailers' stock, which he either liquidated, sold to other store owners, or took back to his own shop, Turner's Bargain Store. "He also knew that where there was failure, there was opportunity," his grandson Cal Turner, Jr., wrote in a memoir, called "My Father's Business," published in 2018.

In 1939, James Luther Turner's only child, Hurley Calister Turner, known as Cal, Sr., bought a building in Scottsville to serve as the warehouse for a new wholesale business, J. L. Turner and Son. Soon, he was buying so much discount

merchandise that he had trouble finding stores to take it, so he and his father started a chain of stores in partnership with local managers. At first, Cal, Sr., later said, the plan was "selling the good stuff to the rich folks, but we were late getting into retailing." He concluded, "We had to sell the cheap stuff to the poor folks." Cal, Sr., had high standards: he called all his store managers on Saturday nights, and made frequent rounds in person. "He wanted a store to be clean and well displayed," Cal, Jr., wrote. He started working for the company when he was about thirteen, sweeping the warehouse for twenty-five cents an hour.

By 1955, the Turners had three dozen stores across Kentucky and Tennessee. Cal, Sr., noticed that crowds of shoppers came to department stores in larger cities when they held "dollar days," selling off excess merchandise cheaply. On June 1st of that year, the company converted a store in Springfield, Kentucky, into one called Dollar General. The store was a sensation, as was a second one, in Memphis, which in ten months did more than a million dollars in sales. Soon, all J. L. Turner and Son stores were renamed Dollar General, with a new slogan above the window: "Every Day Is Dollar Day." Signs outside read "Nothing Over \$1."

At first, the Turners didn't have to radically change their business model. They bought inventory, including irregular items and closeouts, very cheap, and sold it for a little more. When a friend's textile company had an excess of pink corduroy, Cal, Sr., had the friend make men's pants, which he sold for a dollar a pair. He bought a truckload of wet socks in Nashville and had workers sort and hang them around the Scottsville warehouse. When bell-bottoms went out of fashion, he turned them into cutoff shorts. Once, at the end of the Christmas season, he bought thirty-five thousand fruitcakes; he sold them all a year later.

Cal, Sr., sought out cheap real estate. "We don't have to have great locations," he said. "With our merchandise and our prices, we just need some kind of building around us." And he paid poorly: wages were to be kept at a maximum of five per cent of a store's gross sales, which, Cal, Jr., acknowledged, "placed us at the bottom of a low-paying industry." A store typically had only two

employees—and, if business was slow, it got by with just one at a time. When a bookkeeper invited two colleagues to lunch with a union organizer, Cal, Sr., had her fired. After the Teamsters tried to organize the company's truck drivers, the company outsourced its transportation to a contractor and hired a slew of armed guards to escort the new drivers past picketers.

Sales nearly doubled between 1963 and 1968, and the Turners took the chain public. By 1972, they had five hundred stores, and, a few years later, around the time that Cal, Sr., passed the reins to Cal, Jr., they started buying up other chains, also in small towns, extending the company far from its upland-South base. A competing chain, Family Dollar, started by Leon Levine in Charlotte in 1959, focussed mostly on low-income urban areas. By 1974, Levine had two hundred stores; he took his company public five years later.

As the two chains have grown, expanding to offer many goods for more than a dollar, the urban-rural distinction between them has diminished. Today, it is not uncommon to find both stores on the same small-town main street, or a few blocks apart in a distressed urban neighborhood. (Dollar Tree, which bought Family Dollar in 2015 and has maintained both brands, keeps prices closer to a dollar with a more limited selection—wrapping paper, party supplies—sold to a more middle-class clientele. Unlike Dollar General and Family Dollar, Dollar Tree's stores tend to be in suburban locations.) As Amazon and its e-commerce rivals have devastated brick-and-mortar shopping, the two chains represent just about the only branch of physical retail that is still growing in America. Even Walmart, often viewed as the bane of small-town retailers, has been consolidating. Last year, it closed about twenty stores, leaving some communities even more dependent on the two chains. In 2019, discount chains accounted for about half of all new retail-store openings. Dollar General alone opened nearly a thousand stores.

The chains' executives are candid about what is driving their growth: widening income inequality and the decline of many city neighborhoods and entire swaths of the country. Todd Vasos,

the C.E.O. of Dollar General, told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2017, "The economy is continuing to create more of our core customer."

Because dollar stores are heavily concentrated in poor towns and neighborhoods, many middle- and upper-middle-class consumers are unaware of their ubiquity—or of the frequency of armed robberies and shootings. In 2017, the manager of a Dollar General in Baltimore, where I live, was shot and killed as he was closing up. But I discovered the pervasiveness of the problem while reporting elsewhere. In Dayton, Ohio, I got to know Jimmy Donald, who was working for a heating and air-conditioning contractor while trying to start an organization to help ex-felons and others with troubled backgrounds, a category that included himself. Donald, who is thirty-eight, served in the Marines in Iraq. He then spent four years in prison, after being involved in the beating death of a man outside a Michigan bar, in 2004. He lived on the west side of Dayton, which is predominantly black; as the area has lost several grocery stores, the dollar-store chains have proliferated.

This correlation is not a coincidence, according to a 2018 research brief by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, which advocates for small businesses. The stores undercut traditional grocery stores by having few employees, often only three per store, and paying them



little. "While dollar stores sometimes fill a need in cash-strapped communities, growing evidence suggests these stores are not merely a byproduct of economic distress," the brief reported. "They're a cause of it."

There are now more than a dozen Family Dollars and Dollar Generals on Dayton's west side. "In a lot of these areas, they're the only stores around," B. J. Bethel, who has reported on the chains for WDTN, the local NBC affiliate, told

me. For robbers, he added, "it's the only place to get cash." Donald did much of his shopping at the stores, and each week he drove his mother to them to do her shopping as well. One day in Dayton, needing a winter hat, I stopped by a Dollar General at West Third Street and James H. McGee Boulevard, where Donald and his mother were making their way down an aisle. Goods spilled off the shelves, and carts were piled high with boxes waiting to be opened and stacked, giving the store an air of neglect.

Shortly before Donald and I first met, he had been the victim of an armed robbery at another west-side Dollar General. It was homecoming weekend at Central State University, the historically black college near Dayton, and his mother needed some barbecue sauce. Donald was standing in line to pay when two young men, probably in their late teens, came in and pointed a gun at the cashier. Donald concluded that they were amateurs—they weren't wearing masks, and when the one with the gun pulled the slide back, not realizing that a round was already chambered, the bullet popped out. They ordered Donald and two women in line to get on the floor, then took the money that he had just cashed from his paycheck: seven hundred dollars.

Donald described this event in an undramatic and routine manner. And for good reason: armed robberies are a regular occurrence at the Dayton stores. In 2017, the year he was held up, there were thirty-two armed robberies at eighteen Dollar Generals and Family Dollars in Dayton. (This count didn't include the store where he was robbed, which sits just beyond the city line.) Last year, there were two dozen. The violence has included more than robberies, too. Last July, a man and a woman were killed outside a west-side Family Dollar in a murder-suicide; in September, a man was shot during a drug deal outside the Dollar General where I had run into Donald and his mother.

All told, the Dayton police receive an average of nearly a thousand calls for service to the stores each year. There have been more calls to just nine of the city's Family Dollars than there have been to one of Dayton's two major hospitals, Grandview Medical Center, where police are often summoned for inter-

views with victims of violent crimes, drug overdoses, and other problems.

The Dayton Police Department prides itself on being a modern, data-driven force, embracing such initiatives as “harm reduction” measures to combat the opioid epidemic. Several years ago, noticing the rise in calls to the dollar stores, the department provided training sessions for Family Dollar managers in how to practice what police call “crime prevention through environmental design.” Officers showed them how less trash outside and less clutter inside and fewer big ads in the windows, which block the view of responding police officers, would make their stores safer. The store managers were told to instruct cashiers to make frequent transfers of cash from the register to the safe. (Until 2004, Dollar General did not accept credit cards, and the stores still deal heavily in cash.)

But Jason Hall, the commander of the city’s Violent Crime Bureau, told me that the effect of the training had dissipated, partly because the stores, which pay a starting wage of about nine or ten dollars an hour in states without higher minimum-wage thresholds, have such high turnover. “It was supposed to be passed down to the rest of the employees, but it didn’t trickle down,” he said. “The rank and file did not reap the benefit of that training.” Store managers have resisted pleas to reduce trash or loitering outside their stores, saying that their responsibility is limited to the stores themselves. And they are often slow about getting police the feed from store cameras after robberies, Hall said. The cameras are typically of such low quality and so poorly placed that their records are of limited use anyway. Nan Whaley, the mayor of Dayton, told me that managers sometimes discourage employees from testifying in court against robbers, because they’re needed to staff the stores. (A spokesperson for Dollar General said that she was unaware of this practice.) “What is that? They’re not even respecting the justice system,” Whaley said. “They don’t even care if they’re being held up at gunpoint.”

Recently, Dayton has cited the crime and violence that the stores attract as a reason to challenge their requests to sell alcohol. Several years ago, Dollar General obtained alcohol licenses for many



“I thought we agreed—no dressing up for video chats.”

of its Dayton-area stores. In 2017, the city’s law department began seeking to block requests by Family Dollar to obtain licenses for seven of its stores, including three on the west side. The city had an easier time enlisting community testimony against alcohol-license applications for stores on the north and east sides of town, which are less heavily African-American. City officials attributed this imbalance in part to a general sense of resignation and powerlessness on the west side.

When the state’s Division of Liquor Control approved all but one Family Dollar request, Martin Gehres, the assistant city attorney, drove a fifteen-passenger van full of north- and east-side residents to appeals hearings in Columbus. The residents, who included the owner of a bakery across from a Family Dollar and the manager of an adjacent library branch, won reversals of the approval for that store and for another on the north side. But the alcohol sales went ahead on the west side, where crime is worse. “The stores they got them at

were the ones I was most concerned about,” Gehres said.

When I met with Gehres and Hall, they told me they were aware that the stores filled a retail void for many residents of Dayton, which has lost nearly half its residents since 1960. But they also cited research suggesting that, in some places, the dollar stores have exacerbated the problem. “They are filling a food desert,” Gehres said. “And they are helping cause a food desert.”

Even the most image-conscious public corporations tend to acknowledge, in their required disclosures to investors and in their quarterly calls with market analysts, the challenges facing them. So it was startling to find no mention of the prevalence of crime and violence in recent filings for either Dollar General or Family Dollar and Dollar Tree. Company executives make occasional reference to “shrink,” the industry euphemism for stock lost mainly to shoplifting or employee theft. But the steady stream of violence at the stores,



"Did you shake it first to see if it's any good?"

much of it directed against employees, was omitted.

Dollar General emphasized its efforts to keep costs down. In its disclosures for the third quarter of 2019, Dollar General lamented the rise in nationwide hourly wages, and said that it was aiming to shift to self-checkout in many stores. The company hopes not to have to increase security at stores, since its "financial condition could be affected adversely" by doing so. "Our ability to pass along labor costs to our customers is constrained by our everyday low price model," Dollar General concluded, "and we may not be able to offset such increased costs elsewhere in our business." Similarly, Dollar Tree executives told analysts in a quarterly call in March that they were pushing "productivity initiatives" in stores, which would help get more from fewer workers. "We are well positioned in the most attractive sector of retail to deliver continued

growth and increase value for our shareholders," Gary Philbin, the company's C.E.O., said.

In the past five years, the share price of Dollar General has nearly tripled, outpacing the broader stock market by some eighty per cent and vastly outperforming traditional grocery stores and retailers such as Kroger and Macy's. In 2018, Vasos, Dollar General's C.E.O., received more than ten million dollars in total compensation, nearly eight hundred times the median pay for workers at the company. Philbin, at Dollar Tree, was paid about the same amount.

Asked about the hundreds of incidents of violent crime at their stores, the companies said that they took security concerns seriously, but they did not elaborate on preventive measures at the stores. Both companies declined to say how many had armed security. Randy Guiler, a Family Dollar spokesman, said, in written responses to questions, "To

ensure the integrity of our security systems and procedures, we do not publicly share specific details." None of the ten dollar stores that I visited in Dayton had a security guard present. In liquor-board testimony, the Family Dollar manager for the region stretching across Interstate 70 from Dayton to St. Louis said that the company deployed security guards at only a couple of stores in his region, in St. Louis and Cincinnati.

Guiler said that the stores cooperated fully with local police departments, and had in some places opened tip lines with rewards for information leading to arrests. He told me that the company recently hired the security firm ADT to upgrade the stores' camera systems. Asked about the stores' low staffing levels, Guiler said, "We are a small-box retailer. Staffing levels can, and do, vary by day, by hour and based on store sales volumes."

A spokesperson for Dollar General said, "In keeping with our mission of Serving Others, we are proud to provide a convenient, affordable retail option to customers and communities that other retailers choose not to serve."

When Jolanda Woods heard about Robert's murder, she returned to St. Louis from Philadelphia, where she had been working at a nonprofit, to organize his funeral. In an interview with KMOV, the local CBS affiliate, she faulted Dollar General for leaving stores understaffed and for allowing stock to pile up near the door, making it harder for workers and customers to escape robberies. "That's not enough staff to secure your store with no security," she said. "You can't expect them to watch the aisles, work the cash registers, watch the thieves and stop the thieves."

In February, I went to St. Louis and visited the Dollar General where Robert was killed. Inside the entrance was just the sort of barrier that Jolanda had described: a double-wide column of several dozen "totes," or large plastic crates, holding a jumble of goods on clearance. There were cable protectors and scented oils and chicken-jerky curls and baby pacifiers and "Frozen"-themed Ziploc bags and party napkins and elastic wrist supports and charcoal foot scrub and romance novels. In the shampoo aisle, a manager was telling an employee to mark down certain goods with a price

gun. “I want to sell this because this is what creates totes in the back room, and I hate totes in the back room,” he said. “So get your gun.”

The next morning, I went to see Jolanda at her new house, in an inner suburb just north of the city. She called up her friend Winter and put her on speakerphone. Winter knew a lot about crime that had occurred at that Dollar General in the years when Jolanda had been living in Philadelphia. There was the time some men loaded up a large trash can with stolen goods at the store’s back door and then just hauled it out. There was the time a manager she knew became so frustrated by the crime that he asked a friend from East St. Louis to serve as de-facto security. After the friend got in an altercation with a suspected thief, the company reprimanded them, which led both to quit. “When they quit, it was all on again,” Winter said.

The police say that Robert Woods’s killing remains unsolved. Jolanda had received a workers’-compensation payment on Robert’s behalf, but she was contemplating organizing a class-action lawsuit on behalf of family members of other victims of violence at Dollar Generals. “You have a service and a product that’s needed in a community,” she said. “Well, you have to be part of the community to make that work. And being part of it means I’m going to secure you while you’re here. I’m going to have somebody on my lot to make sure you get to your cars. I’m going to secure it.” These stores are throughout our community, but they have no interest in the community. They’re not giving nothing back. They give nothing back.”

Last October, Jimmy Donald was in line with a friend at a Dollar General on the west side of Dayton, at 2228 North Gettysburg, a short drive from the one where he took his mother to shop and the one where he had been robbed. He was startled to see that the cashier was carrying a pistol on his hip. The cashier, Dave Dukes, said that he had been held up recently and wanted to be ready in case it happened again.

Frustration was rising at City Hall, too. When Mayor Whaley entered city government, in 2005, she viewed the dollar chains as serving a useful pur-

pose, but over time she saw how the chains’ stores in urban neighborhoods contrasted with the ones in rural areas. Residents often sent her photos of dangerously cluttered aisles, and she asked fire marshals to issue warnings. “The more and more ubiquitous they’ve gotten, they’ve gotten less and less caring,” she said. “I came to see them as glorified check-cashing and payday lenders, for the way they prey off the poor but don’t really care about the poor.”

In January, 2019, John Cranley, the mayor of Cincinnati, wrote a letter about his city’s struggles with the stores to the C.E.O. of Dollar Tree, which led to a meeting at Cincinnati’s City Hall with Cranley, Whaley, the cities’ police chiefs, and some company executives. The executives started giving a PowerPoint presentation about Dollar Tree, but the mayors cut them off, and threatened to file lawsuits against the company. The executives promised to work on “good neighbor” agreements with the cities instead, laying out terms for better co-operation. (Asked for an update this spring, Gehres, Dayton’s assistant city attorney, wrote in an e-mail, “Family Dollar and the City are ironing out the terms. Some language concerns a litter abatement program and environmental improvements to mitigate some of our concerns.”)

Some cities have started to take more dramatic measures. In 2018 and 2019, Tulsa, New Orleans, and Birmingham,

believing that the stores’ concentration dissuaded traditional grocers from moving in, were among the cities that passed legislation requiring new chain dollar stores to be at least a mile apart, unless they held a minimum square footage of fresh food. Whaley and Gehres told me that Dayton had considered taking this step but decided that it would be of little more than symbolic value, since the city’s immediate challenge was contending with problems at the stores it already had.

Eventually, I made it to the Dollar General on North Gettysburg, where Jimmy Donald had seen Dave Dukes, the cashier with the gun on his hip. But he was no longer there.

On October 9, 2019, Roosevelt Rappley, a twenty-three-year-old man who police said had been involved in several dollar-store robberies, came into the store carrying a gun. Dukes, who is twenty-eight, had been employed at the store for a year and a half, after years of working in construction. He had been promoted to assistant manager and, he said, had repeatedly asked his supervisors for a security guard at the store, to no avail. He had a concealed-carry permit for the gun, and, in any case, Ohio allowed open carry without a permit. The store manager knew about the gun and had not prevented him from carrying it.

When Rappley drew his gun and



“We have to record this, or no one’s going to believe us.”

threatened him, Dukes shot him dead. Dukes then called 911. “I just had somebody try to attempt and rob me over here at Dollar General on Gettysburg,” he said. “Came in with a firearm, threatened to take money out the drawer, pointed a gun at me and my staff members. . . . He pointed a gun at me. I had a firearm on me. I pulled my firearm, and I shot him in self-defense.” (Dukes was not charged.)

The next day, Dollar General told Dukes not to return to work, according to Dukes’s lawyer, Erik Blaine. “This is a company that decided to place their stores in certain areas and absolutely fought requests for security, and then, when someone does defend themselves and their co-workers, they’re thrown out the next day,” Blaine told me. “For a company that puts profits so far over people to put their store employees at risk of life and death, it’s just unconscionable.” Dollar General declined to answer questions about the case. “When employee actions are part of police investigations, we thoroughly review matters and take appropriate action, as necessary,” the company said.

In November, just a few weeks after Rappley’s death, someone robbed the Dollar General on nearby Salem Avenue, where Jimmy Donald had been robbed in 2017. The robber wore a surgical mask and fired a gun before leaving.

Soon afterward, Edwin Goldsmith, who is thirty-two, took a job there. The only security training he received was a twelve-minute video. Cashiers were instructed to give up the cash in the drawer if threatened, to include a dye pack to make it easier to trace the money, and to use a red phone behind the register to call a security company that Dollar General uses. Goldsmith’s supervisors ignored his request for security guards. On St. Patrick’s Day, as Ohio started to shut down amid the coronavirus pandemic, a man walked into the store while pulling on a mask, and took out a gun. There was only eighty dollars in the register; the cashiers had just transferred cash to the drop box. There was no dye pack in the register to add to the money—it still hadn’t been replaced after the November robbery. Goldsmith had only recently removed a part of the counter that the gunman had damaged with a bullet.

Goldsmith, the most senior of the

three employees on shift, worried that the robber would come back for more money. So Goldsmith got his own gun from his car and slipped it under his waistband. The police arrived, as did the Dollar General district manager. When they played back the camera footage to see the robbery, they also saw Goldsmith getting his gun. The following day, the store manager told Goldsmith that the company had told her to fire him for having violated the company handbook’s rule against bringing a gun to work. Dollar General declined to comment on the firing.

Goldsmith had never seen the handbook. “It’s not right for me to lose my job all because I didn’t want to die in the store,” he told me the next day.

About six months after Robert Woods’s murder, Javon Pearson took a job at the Family Dollar on Dr. Martin Luther King Drive in St. Louis, a mile and a half from the Dollar General where Woods was killed. Pearson, who was thirty-one, had worked at Wendy’s for seven years, but his prospects for promotion conflicted with his child-care schedule; he had three children, ages ten, six, and three, whose custody he shared. So he switched to Family Dollar, while working a second job at Save A Lot, one of the few grocery stores left in North St. Louis. He worked midnight to 6 A.M. stocking shelves at Save A Lot, then 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. at Family Dollar, getting home in time to see his kids, often with some treats from Family Dollar in hand, and to rest for a few hours before returning to Save A Lot. “We don’t sleep,” his mother, Carolyn Noble, said. She cared for Pearson’s children when she wasn’t working as a medical assistant at a mental-health facility. “We work.”

On October 3rd, Pearson was working at the Family Dollar when, according to an account that co-workers later gave to his family, he had a dispute with a man whose girlfriend he had caught shoplifting. He left the store at 3 P.M. with another employee, who was going to give him a ride home. As they were crossing the parking lot, two young men approached and shot him. Pearson’s aunt, Shari Ealy, had lost a seventeen-year-old daughter to gun violence, in 2006. When she heard about the shooting at Fam-

ily Dollar, she rushed to the store. Even from a distance, Ealy recognized him by his sneakers. Carolyn Noble got to the store moments later. “That’s not my baby, is it?” she asked, before collapsing to the pavement.

I went to see Noble and Ealy at Ealy’s house, a small bungalow in University City, an inner suburb just west of St. Louis. The blinds were drawn, a large TV was on, and children and teen-agers were coming and going from the house. It had been four months since Pearson’s murder—the police had not made any arrests—and Noble said that she had been too grief-stricken to go back to work. “I’m just starting to come out,” she said.

She began by talking about the air-conditioners, and kept coming back to them in the hour that followed. Why did the stores go to such lengths to lock down the air-conditioning units that cool their buildings but do so little to secure the workers and shoppers inside?

The disregard had continued after her son’s death, she said. Save A Lot had sent food and sodas to the family, with condolences. Even Wendy’s, where he no longer worked, had offered to help, and several area managers had come to the funeral. But Family Dollar management had not contacted her, and had discouraged employees from attending the funeral, she said. (Family Dollar declined to comment.)

After the funeral, she said, several other family members had asked why her son had worked at the Family Dollar, given the level of crime there. This bothered Noble. The store was close to their home, which made it convenient, considering all the rushing between jobs and child care. “Why can’t I work in my neighborhood?” she said. “Why can’t you work in your neighborhood?”

She used to shop at Family Dollar sometimes, to buy toiletries or household items or little gifts for her mental-health clients—jogging suits or the occasional five-dollar perfume. She had stopped going since the murder, but one day she had been driving past a Family Dollar a little farther west, and had gone in and asked the cashier how she felt working there. “For real? It’s scary,” the cashier said, and mentioned the fatal shooting at the store down the road. Carolyn Noble said nothing. ♦



STUDIO NOTES ON YOUR ROM-COM SCREENPLAY

BY CRAIG THOMAS

Thanks for turning in the new draft of your script. We're thrilled! It has blossomed into a charming rom-com for the ages! Sorry for our delay in giving you notes. (The timing was tough, with the quarantine and all.) The good news: our whole development team feels that the script is one rewrite away from a green light! We have only a few small notes:

IN GENERAL: We want to make sure that our leads, Shaun and Rosie, are still coming across as likable and responsible, given our new post-COVID-19/social-distancing reality.

PAGE 5: You describe Shaun and Rosie's first encounter as a "meet-cute," but this now feels glib. Please revise to a "meet-sombre" or a "meet-crying." (Perhaps one or both have a critically ill loved one? And clarify that they remain six feet apart at all times.)

PAGE 7: Shaun notices Rosie's "million-dollar smile"—but how would he be able to see it under the face mask that she should now be wearing throughout the entire film? (Maybe Shaun in-

stead admires Rosie's "million-dollar upper-nose area and/or forehead"?)

PAGE 8: Shaun describes Rosie's laughter as "contagious." Please change to literally any other adjective.

PAGE 10: We love the "opposites attract" angle (and the subversion of stereotype) that *she's* a slob and *he's* a neat freak, but instead can they both be neat freaks?

PAGE 16: Please change "Shaun and Rosie's First Date" to "Shaun and Rosie's First Zoom Date."

PAGE 24: Please change "Shaun and Rosie's Second Date" to "Shaun and Rosie's Second Zoom Date."

PAGE 35: Please change "The Bris of Shaun and Rosie's Mutual Friend's Baby" to "The Zoom Bris of Shaun and Rosie's Mutual Friend's Baby."

(Great news: Zoom has boarded this project as a producer!)

PAGE 47: Shaun calls Rosie's smile "infectious." Please change to literally any other adjective.

PAGE 54: We love that Rosie has a mischievous dog, Tugboat, who's always making trouble for her love life!

(Note: Maybe the entire film can instead be an animated family movie about Tugboat's hilarious high jinks? Might be easier to physically produce at this point.)

PAGE 68: We love the plot complication of Rosie's big, successful architecture firm taking over Shaun's tiny, about-to-go-bankrupt firm, but instead can both firms be about to go bankrupt?

PAGE 75: The scene in which Rosie, who's now Shaun's boss, is supposed to fire Shaun but chickens out and gives him a raise instead—can you try another angle here?

(This note isn't COVID-related; we just thought this scene was almost unforgivably hacky.)

ALSO, don't forget to squeeze more TUGBOAT in here! Maybe Tugboat also has a love interest, a cute lady dog across the hall, and they have a Zoom date?! (Um, TRAILER-MOMENT ALERT!)

(Great news: Zoom has purchased our studio. And now we have a slogan—"Zoom: Keeping you securely connected wherever you are!" Please have a character say this verbatim, but in a way that feels natural and unforced.)

PAGE 81: We love this fifteen-page set piece at the World Series (and how do you not love a girl who loves the Mets this much, haha!), but since there's no baseball anymore, or public events of any kind, can this instead be an online heart-smart-recipe exchange?

Finally, although we love that Shaun is a fancy-pants Upper East Sider with family ties to British royalty, whereas Rosie is a gritty neighborhood girl from Queens, the movie's title, "Rosie: The Queen of Corona"—yeah, that's gotta go. (But we have a new title idea!)

Again, all of us here at Zoom Studios are psyched. We plan to fast-track this film in our next production slate, once things return to normal. Assuming the rewrite goes well, we'll greenlight "Zoom Into My Heart" to start shooting in the late summer/early fall of 2025. Zoom! ♦

RABBIT FEVER

A highly contagious, often lethal animal virus arrives in the United States.

BY SUSAN ORLEAN



Most rabbits have, in their skill set, the ability to pretend that they're healthy even when they're quite sick. It's sort of the inverse of playing possum, but done for the same purpose, namely, to deflect attention from predators, who would consider a sick rabbit easy pickings. As a result of this playacting, rabbits often die suddenly—or what appears to be suddenly—when, in fact, they've been sick for a while.

This past February, a pet rabbit being boarded overnight at Manhattan's Center for Avian and Exotic Medicine, the busiest rabbit veterinary practice in New York City, died. The fact that the rabbit had seemed fine and then ex-

pired without warning was chalked up to the rabbit habit of feigning good health. Later that evening, another rabbit at the clinic died. The coincidence of the additional death was strange, especially because the first rabbit that died was elderly, and the second was young. A third rabbit that died the same night was middle-aged; even though she was known to have had an abdominal mass that compromised her well-being, there had been no reason to think she was about to perish. Two deaths might have been a fluke; three seemed ominous.

The clinic's staff wanted to get the remaining fifteen or twenty rabbits out

of the building immediately, but many of the owners were away and unable to retrieve them on short notice. This group happened to include Dr. Alix Wilson, the clinic's medical director, who was on vacation and whose own rabbits, Captain Larry and Dolly, were boarding there. In the meantime, the staff threw out all the clinic's rabbit food and bedding, in case something in them had poisoned the three rabbits. Within several weeks, eight more rabbits that had been at the clinic in February succumbed. Captain Larry was thriving, but Dolly, a medium-sized Lop that Wilson had just adopted to keep Larry company, died.

One of the lagoviruses of the family Caliciviridae causes a highly contagious illness called rabbit hemorrhagic disease. RHD is vexingly hard to diagnose. An infected rabbit might experience vague lethargy, or a high fever and difficulty breathing, or it might exhibit no symptoms at all. Regardless of the symptoms, though, the mortality rate for RHD can reach a gloomy hundred per cent. There is no treatment for it. The virus's ability to survive and spread is uncanny. It can persist on dry cloth with no host for more than a hundred days; it can withstand freezing and thawing; it can thrive in a dead rabbit for months, and on rabbit pelts, and in the wool made from Angora-rabbit fur, and in the rare rabbit that gets infected but survives. It can travel on birds' claws and flies' feet and coyotes' fur. Its spread has been so merciless and so devastating that some pet owners have begun referring to it as "rabbit Ebola."

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, RHD is a "foreign animal disease": one that is "an important transmissible livestock or poultry disease believed to be absent from the United States and its territories that has the potential to create a significant health or economic impact." All foreign animal diseases are "reportable." This means that any incidence needs to be logged with a state animal-health official. In most places, that's the state veterinarian, who, like a governor, oversees local policy. (Many animal issues are decided at the state level.) It must also be reported to

Rabbits are the only creatures we keep as pets and, just as regularly, eat or wear.

the U.S.D.A. and to the World Organisation for Animal Health, which is headquartered in Paris and tracks the virus globally.

Alix Wilson was familiar with RHD, and she wondered in passing whether it might have been responsible for the deaths at her clinic. “But then I thought, No, impossible,” she said recently. “Rabbit hemorrhagic disease isn’t in the city.” Her staff sent tissue from one of the dead rabbits to a lab at Cornell University, which subsequently transferred it to the federal foreign-animal-disease lab, on Plum Island, in New York. When the diagnosis came back as a variant of the virus, called RHDV2, Wilson was astonished. The clinic immediately stopped taking in any rabbits, and began a deep cleaning, which included replacing ceiling tiles and discarding thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment that couldn’t be sterilized. Todd Johnson, the U.S.D.A.’s emergency coordinator for New York and New Jersey, helped oversee the cleanup, and a veterinary epidemiologist and an intern from the department contacted a hundred and fifty-five owners of rabbits that had been in the clinic during the previous few months, in an effort to identify Rabbit Zero. The bewildering thing was that, as it turned out, rabbits had already been dying of RHDV2 in Washington State, and soon were dying in other states, including Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, and Nevada.

The rabbit-hemorrhagic-disease virus was originally identified in 1984, in Jiangsu Province, China. First, it killed Angora rabbits being raised commercially for wool, and then it burned through pet rabbits and rabbits farmed for meat, all of which are members of the same species, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, or what is commonly known as the European, or domestic, rabbit. During the initial outbreak in China, some hundred and forty million rabbits were killed by the virus. The disease soon ravaged rabbit populations elsewhere in Asia, and then in Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Middle East.

There were only a handful of cases of the original variant of RHD in this country, and they were quickly contained. Still, the majority of rabbit prod-

ucts—meat, fur, skins, and live rabbits—imported to the United States came from countries where the disease had been widespread. The U.S.D.A. still classified it as a foreign animal disease, but a department report, written in 2002, warned that RHD “has emerged as a growing concern for the rabbit industry following outbreaks in 2000 and 2001.”

In the universe of human-animal relations, rabbits occupy a liminal space. They are the only creatures we regularly keep as pets in our homes that we also, just as regularly, eat or wear. Fitting into both the companion-animal category and the livestock category means that rabbits are not entirely claimed by either. A number of animal statutes—particularly, felony-cruelty provisions—are specific to dogs and cats, but not to rabbits. Laws protecting livestock, such as the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, don’t apply to rabbits, either, even rabbits being raised for meat, because the U.S.D.A. does not officially recognize them as livestock. There is probably no other animal that is viewed as diversely, and valued as differently, by its various partisans. Simply being a rabbit person doesn’t mean that you look at rabbits the same way as another self-identified rabbit person. Any of the almost twenty thousand members of the American Rabbit Breeders Association are just as likely to be raising a prized Jersey Wooly that sleeps in their bed and is primed for rabbit shows as they are to have hundreds of caged rabbits that will end up as stew.

A few years ago, a lawyer named Natalie Reeves, who volunteers at a rabbit shelter and has lectured on rabbit law at the New York City Bar Association, was having trouble untangling the hair of her pet long-haired rabbit, Mopsy McGillicuddy. She found an Internet group for long-haired-rabbit owners, and posted about Mopsy’s hair troubles, expecting tips on conditioners and brushes. On the site, she noticed that a common response to similar problems was to kill the rabbit and start fresh with another.

Rabbits are everywhere among us. They live on every continent except Antarctica, in a wide range of environ-

ments. They have been domesticated for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. There have even been noteworthy rabbit booms. During the Victorian era, the most sought-after, bidded-up bunnies were a domestic breed, the Belgian Hare, which was developed to look like a wild rabbit. Belgians had sleek, black-ticked chestnut fur, comically long ears, and long bodies; they were the spitting image, in fact, of Peter Rabbit, who debuted in Beatrix Potter’s “The Tale of Peter Rabbit” in 1902, in the thick of Belgian Hare mania.

A shipment of six thousand Belgian Hares that arrived in the United States from Europe in 1900 attracted interest from tycoons including the Rockefellers, the DuPonts, and J. P. Morgan, who considered them an equity investment. (A male sold for five thousand dollars—the equivalent of more than a hundred and fifty thousand today.) According to the Livestock Conservancy, nearly every large American city soon had a Belgian Hare club. Fans in Los Angeles alone had sixty thousand Belgians. Rabbits being rabbits, the number of Belgian Hares grew exponentially, and the market for them eventually buckled. People moved on to other breeds, and superfluous Belgians began to disappear. By the nineteen-forties, there was a worry that they might become extinct.

Rabbits have an unusual history with viruses. The first virus ever deliberately used to eradicate a wild-animal population was myxoma virus, which causes myxomatosis, a disease fatal to domestic rabbits. It was deployed in 1950, in Australia, where a dozen or so domestic rabbits released on a hunting estate in 1859 had outperformed all mathematical modelling and become many hundreds of millions—the fastest-known spread of any mammal on earth. The rabbits wreaked ecological disaster as they ate their way across the country. Shooting them made only a temporary dent in their numbers. Myxoma virus was introduced in the hope of controlling the population; it soon killed an estimated five hundred million rabbits. (In parts of Australia, it is still illegal to have a pet rabbit.)

Two years later, a French doctor, annoyed by rabbits stealing from his



"He really misses the city."

garden, caught two of them and injected them with myxoma. They bolted, surviving long enough to carry the virus to other rabbits. The disease eventually bloomed across Europe and the United Kingdom, killing almost every rabbit in its path. Eventually, a myxomatosis vaccine was developed, and the disease was more or less brought under control.

Myxomatosis did travel to the United States, but for some reason it never got much of a foothold here. Had it established itself, it would have been disastrous, because at that time, in the middle of the last century, rabbits were a significant food source. Most people associate rabbit meat with European diets, but it was once a staple in this country. There were many huge commercial rabbit farms in the United States, and rabbit meat was readily available in supermarkets. The biggest processor was (and still is) Pel-Freez, founded in 1911 by a man who was given

a pet rabbit that was pregnant, and, according to Pel-Freez's corporate history, turned "the dilemma into an opportunity." Rabbit meat, which could be cooked like chicken, was appealingly high in protein and low in fat. Back then, it was also much cheaper than beef. And raising rabbits is easy. A rabbit can give birth every thirty days; a young rabbit reaches what is known as "fryer age" in just sixty days. But, even during their heyday as a market product, rabbits weren't treated like other livestock. Because the U.S.D.A. doesn't classify them as such, it has never required rabbit meat to be inspected or graded.

After the Second World War, the demand for rabbit meat began to decline. The number of cattle being raised domestically nearly doubled, and beef, which had previously been something of a luxury, became affordable. The cattle industry, which brings in some seventy billion dollars a year, began

promoting beef as the patriotic mainstay of the American dinner table. In the same years, chicken also became more widely available. Soon, it became the white meat of choice, and rabbit was marginalized as an occasional dish.

Eric Stewart, the executive director of the American Rabbit Breeders Association, also lays the blame for the decline of rabbit meat on Bugs Bunny. Created in 1940, Bugs, a sassy, man-size gray-and-white cartoon rabbit, had a leading role in Warner Bros.' "Merrie Melodies" and "Looney Tunes"; "The Bugs Bunny Show" began in 1960 and ran on network television for forty years. Stewart believes that the generations that had grown up watching Bugs could not stomach eating rabbit. Then, in 1981, pet-rabbit ownership got a huge boost, with the publication of "Your French Lop: The King of the Fancy, the Clown of Rabbits, the Ideal Pet." The author, a rabbit owner named Sandy Crook, argued that pet rabbits, which were then typically relegated to a hutch in the back yard, made perfect house pets, just like cats and dogs. Rabbits could be kept inside, because they could be trained to use a litter box. Many people consider the book the foundational text of the house-rabbit movement. Another best-selling manifesto, Marinell Harriman's "House Rabbit Handbook: How to Live with an Urban Rabbit," was published four years later.

The number of rabbits kept as house pets has grown ever since. We don't know exactly how many rabbits there are in the United States, but they are the third most popular pet in the country, behind dogs and cats, and the most popular small pet, beating out hamsters, guinea pigs, and mice. The U.S.D.A. estimates that there are more than 6.7 million pet rabbits, but the total number of domestic rabbits would depend on whether you're counting only pet rabbits or including rabbits raised for slaughter. Further complicating matters is the category of rabbits raised as, say, a 4-H project, which, once the project is done, might segue from pet to meat.

Rabbit-related activities are also on the bounce. There are about five thousand A.R.B.A.-sanctioned rabbit shows each year; the largest one features more

than twenty-five thousand rabbits. There are rabbit fashion shows, which are especially popular in Japan. A show in Yokohama has featured rabbits dressed like Sherlock Holmes, Amelia Earhart, and Santa Claus. In New York City, pet owners organize rabbit playdates in Central Park. Across the country, there are rabbit speed dates, which are opportunities for rabbits to meet and see if they like one another, if an owner is thinking of getting a second, or third, or fourth. The typical American owner has more than one rabbit, so speed dating is important, because rabbits, despite their prodigious ability to multiply, don't always get along.

Within five years of the emergence of the original form of rabbit hemorrhagic disease in China, a vaccine protecting against RHD had been developed. A number of manufacturers produce vaccines against this strain, including Filavie, in France; HIPRA, in Spain; and Merck, which is headquartered in New Jersey but made the vaccine for the European market. The vaccine was never offered in the United States. There were only a few RHDV1 cases here, including one in Pennsylvania, which was theorized to have come from an Oktoberfest party, where imported rabbit meat was served. If the meat was infected, the virus could have spread to vegetables prepared in the same kitchen; the vegetable scraps were then fed to rabbits.

Most countries affected by the virus began offering the vaccine, and within a few years the spread appeared to have been tamped down. But, in 2010, rabbits in France began dying of what turned out to be a mutated version of the virus. The vaccine for the original virus was ineffective against the new strain; this was RHDV2. Soon, it was rampant throughout Europe and Australia. In England, the spread was so vigorous that parents were advised not to let their children bury their dead rabbits in the garden, because, “while comforting to children,” the practice “may help circulate rabbit virus.” The mortality rate of the new variant appeared to be slightly lower than that of the original, and at first this seemed like good news. But, in fact, RHDV2 was even more efficient at spreading,

in the sense that more infected rabbits were surviving, and, because they might not show symptoms, they weren't being isolated, and passed along the disease. Vaccines guarding against RHDV2 were developed. (In some cases, they were produced in combination with the vaccine that prevents RHDV1.) By 2016, they were available across Europe, and vaccinating rabbits became common.

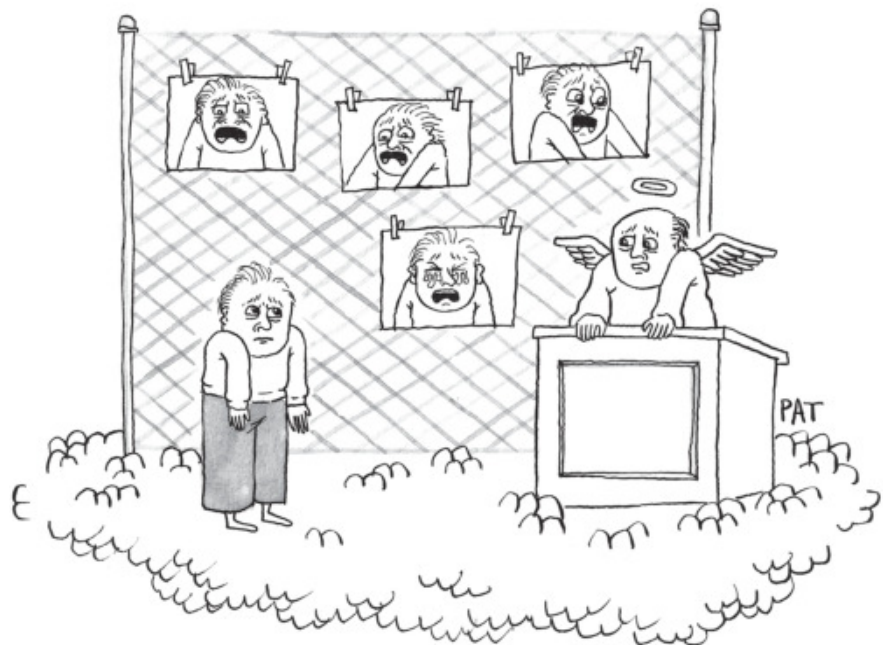
The new variant, like the original, at first seemed to stay away from the United States, except for a few isolated cases. But, in July, 2019, a pet Norwegian Dwarf male on Orcas Island, near Seattle, died with a bloody nose. A veterinarian who saw the rabbit in a clinic was aware of RHD, and knew that bloody noses are a symptom, so she called the Washington State Department of Agriculture to report the death. Susan Kerr, an education and outreach specialist there, was alarmed, because she knew there was an RHDV2 outbreak in British Columbia, so the clinic sent the rabbit's body to a lab for a necropsy.

While waiting for those results, Kerr's co-workers got calls from a number of people on San Juan Island, about a dozen miles southwest of Orcas Island. San Juan is famous for its rabbits. In the nineteen-thirties, a commercial

breeder there went out of business, and released three thousand rabbits into the wild. They multiplied and became a tourist attraction, and rabbit hunting on the island was so celebrated that, in the sixties, *Sports Illustrated* ran a story about it, titled “Hippity Hop and Away We Go.” By 1971, San Juan Island, which covers just fifty-five square miles, was home to an estimated one million feral domestic rabbits.

Kerr's department also received calls from a few nearby islands reporting rabbit deaths. Soon, the lab confirmed that the Orcas Island rabbit had died of RHDV2. Kerr then got news that most of the hundred and forty-five rabbits at a facility on the Olympic Peninsula, across Puget Sound from the islands, had died in a three-week period. Their symptoms sounded like RHDV2; the virus was travelling. As a precaution, rabbits and rabbit products were banned from the ferry system that services Puget Sound.

A colleague of Kerr's posted about the outbreak on an online animal-health newsletter, and was inundated with requests from owners who knew that a vaccine existed, asking how they could get their rabbits inoculated. But the vaccine for RHDV2, like the vaccine for the original virus, was available only overseas. No companies had a license



“Welcome to Heaven. Would you like to buy a souvenir photo from your life?”

to distribute it in the United States. The U.S.D.A. opposed importing it, except for limited special circumstances. One problem is that attempts to produce the vaccine on cell lines in a laboratory have failed. Merck produces a vaccine in cells, but it's a live, genetically modified vaccine, which is not permitted in this country. The other companies that currently manufacture the RHD vaccine produce it by infecting live rabbits with RHD. When those rabbits die, vaccines are made from their livers. According to a spokesperson for Filavie, one rabbit yields several thousand vaccine doses.

The U.S.D.A. also maintained that vaccinating some rabbits would make it difficult to distinguish between sick rabbits and those with antibodies produced by the vaccine, although, since most sick rabbits died, the distinction would actually be very clear. In the rabbit community, the department's mulishness was infuriating. Some people said that it reflected a bad attitude to-

ward rabbits, seeing them as disposable goods, easily replaced. Others thought that the department simply didn't want to manage all the paperwork required to bring a vaccine from overseas, or just didn't want to acknowledge that the virus was present.

The U.S.D.A. finally agreed to consider requests for the emergency importation of limited amounts of the vaccine, but only if veterinarians applied first through their state veterinarians. Leaving the question of the vaccine to the states, though, meant that there could be fifty different decisions on it—a patchwork of guidelines for a disease that would travel with no regard to borders. A number of veterinarians said that they were interested in applying to import the vaccine, but, once they discovered the headaches involved, most of them gave up. Alicia McLaughlin, one of the medical directors of the Center for Bird and Exotic Animal Medicine, in Bothell, Washington, was the first veteri-

narian in the country to obtain the vaccine, which she ordered from Filavie. She, too, had heard about the RHDV2 outbreak in British Columbia, so she started researching how to get the vaccine, and compiled a list of several hundred clients who were requesting it. "I knew the virus would get here," she said recently. "Once it was in British Columbia, it was just a matter of time."

She applied to the Washington state veterinarian; was shuttled for a month between the state agriculture department and the U.S.D.A.; had to manage language and time-zone barriers; then had to hire a customs broker to shepherd the vaccines across borders. Finally, more than four months after she applied, she received five hundred doses of Filavac VHD K C+V, which protects against both RHDV1 and RHDV2. By the time McLaughlin was finally able to administer the vaccine to her clients, in April, concerns over COVID-19 had meant that she could offer only curbside service, and had to struggle to find personal protective equipment, which she needed, because she was interacting with patients and handling their animals.

Around this same time, the Center for Avian and Exotic Medicine, in Manhattan, had been thoroughly sanitized after its RHDV2 outbreak. To be absolutely sure that it was uncontaminated, Alix Wilson brought two rabbits to live at the clinic as sentinels. Because the virus is so contagious, the rabbits would almost certainly come down with RHDV2 if it was still in the facility. "No one wants to bring animals in to die," she said. "But it's one sure way in veterinary medicine to prove that a cleanup has worked." The rabbits survived. Wilson then applied to import the vaccine, and received a letter from the U.S.D.A. saying that "without evidence of widespread infection" the risk was low, especially since, as the department maintained, household rabbits have no contact with others.

Some of the clinic's clients were furious that there had been a few days' delay between the first rabbit deaths and when the clinic put the word out about the diagnosis. According to Wil-



"The humans sent these signals out in the seventies. You really think they're going to buy 'Sorry, just seeing this now!'"

son, the clinic couldn't have done it any faster, since it had to wait to hear the results of the necropsy. The fact is that even the mention of RHD panics rabbit owners. Thousands have joined a Facebook group to exchange knowledge, vent, and worry. Useful information is interlaced with dread. A chief concern is whether it's safe to let a veterinarian know if you think that your rabbit might have RHD, since the veterinarian is obliged to report it to the state veterinarian. The fear—which, according to the New Mexico state veterinarian, Ralph Zimmerman, is mostly justified—is that, if your rabbit does have the virus and you have other rabbits, you will be required to “depopulate”; that is, you will have to euthanize them. There is also persistent chatter that the vaccine actually caused the disease, as part of a global plot to rid the world of rabbits. Recently, a member of the Facebook group proposed that rabbit owners sue Australia, perhaps conflating the past use of myxoma virus there with the outbreak of RHD. “No,” another member replied, “we cannot sue Australia.”

As the clinic in New York was reopening, thirty dead rabbits were found near Fort Bliss, Texas. An unusual number of dead rabbits were also found in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Along with pet rabbits and a small rabbit-meat industry, the Southwest has large populations of wild black-tailed jackrabbits and cottontails. Although they resemble domestic rabbits, these are different species entirely; they can't interbreed with domestic rabbits, nor are they susceptible to all of the same diseases. Wild rabbits seemed immune to RHDV1. But RHDV2 made a cross-species leap and, in March, jackrabbits and cottontails throughout the Southwest began dying in droves. “I've gotten reports that it's in the thousands,” Zimmerman said recently. “I'm sure next I'll be hearing that it's in the tens of thousands.” He has scraped together money from New Mexico's state budget to import five hundred doses of the vaccine, which he will distribute to veterinarians around the state. He assumes that those doses will go to “high-dollar breeding animals.”

But nothing can help the wild rab-

bids. Some vaccines, such as the one for rabies, can be distributed to wild animals by putting them out as food, but the vaccine for the rabbit-hemorrhagic-disease virus has to be given by injection and repeated every year. The concern is not only that many wild rabbits could be lost; what happens to them reverberates in other animals, including foxes and bobcats and wolves and hawks, since rabbits are their chief protein source. “Once they run out of rabbits,” Zimmerman said, “cats and poodles will become their preferred food.” Or, if there aren't enough wayward cats and poodles to go around, they'll starve.

In the past three months, RHDV2 has shown up in seven Western states. Now that it has jumped to wild rabbits, most veterinarians I've spoken to believe that it's here to stay, and that the U.S.D.A. should change its designation from a foreign animal disease to one that's endemic. There have been a few lucky breaks. For instance, the big rabbit shows scheduled for the spring, which would have brought together tens of thousands of rabbits—a recipe for contagion—were cancelled because of COVID-19. Nevertheless, RHDV2 is advancing unabated.

The National Assembly of State Animal Health Officials, which represents all state veterinarians, recently formed a working group to evaluate the vaccine and make recommendations to the public. The group hasn't released its report yet, but recently I got an e-mail from Annette Jones, the California state veterinarian, who is the vice-president of the assembly, saying, “Yes, we should have [the vaccine] available . . . we are hoping a manufacturer steps up and applies to USDA for a license.” No American manufacturer has applied so far, but at least one has contacted the American Rabbit Breeders Association to feel out interest. “It's hard to get these companies interested in rabbit medicine,” a veterinarian told me. “All the money is in cats and dogs.” The fact that people tend to own rabbits in multiples makes the economics of selling the vaccine complicated. Pet owners with

one or two rabbits might not shy away from an annual vaccination that could cost thirty dollars or so, but many rabbit owners have ten or twenty or two hundred rabbits, so the cost becomes prohibitive.

Cost and availability aren't the only challenges. “I'm worried that there is the controversy that a bunny died to make the vaccine,” Alicia McLaughlin told me, sighing. “This vaccine is the only option we have at the moment, so it's frustrating.” The House Rabbit Society, a rabbit-rescue and education organization, posted a letter on its Web site noting that rabbits die in the manufacturing process, and urging members to consider whether “the RHDV2 vac-

cines are right for you and your family.” Natalie Reeves had been eager to vaccinate her current rabbit, Radar, as soon as possible. She has never skimped when it comes to her rabbits—she spent thousands of dollars on veterinary care for Mopsy McGillicuddy, her rabbit with the tangled fur, which suffered from lymphoma. “I just learned information tonight that is very disturbing,” she wrote me in an e-mail, after reading the House Rabbit Society letter. “I don't know whether I could in good conscience vaccinate my rabbit, knowing that I would be contributing to the death of others.”

As RHDV2 is poised to become endemic in the United States, the vaccine, which is the one thing that might stop it, is now caught up in the contradictions of rabbits. When I first spoke to Reeves, she had mentioned that rabbits are the most discriminated against of all domestic animals: ridiculed for their lustiness; viewed as expendable; lumped in with oddball animals like chinchillas and prairie dogs; always subject to the question of whether they're pets or meat. She rued that the vaccine was just one more example of the peculiarity of their place in the world. Would dog owners be expected to use a medicine that was produced by killing a dog? Once again, rabbits seem to be betwixt and between. As Ralph Zimmerman put it, “Rabbits are just a real conundrum.” ♦



It is a place to retreat to in a time of plague. Outside the town are miles and miles of empty land, and few roads. Nothing anywhere but whitegrass, dark, scrubby bushes growing close to the ground, and rocks. Only low mountains and no trees, so there's little to block the incessant wind that blows in from the sea. It's very quiet, at least when the wind dies down, and some people find the silence and the emptiness hard to take. Before the war, in 1982, some of the bigger farms employed dozens of men, and there were settlements with forty or fifty people living in them, but most of those people are gone now, either moved or emigrated. These days, there is one person for every twelve square miles. Some of the old houses are vacant and derelict; others were hauled out of the settlements, leaving not so much as a gravel track behind, because the people who lived there rode horses.

At the edges of the two big islands, East Falkland and West Falkland, are more than seven hundred smaller islands, some empty, others inhabited by only one or two families: a couple of houses, some generators, a landing strip. There is plumbing and Internet. With a big enough freezer, you could stay here without contact for months. Longer, if you know how to live as people did here until very recently: killing and butchering their own mutton, milking cows, collecting seabird eggs and diddle-dee berries, digging peat for fuel. During the war with Argentina, when people were fleeing the town and turning up at farmhouses, there was not much worry about feeding them, or the British soldiers who took shelter in henhouses and shearing sheds. The farmers had vegetable gardens, and countless sheep, and flour and sugar in fifty-kilo sacks.

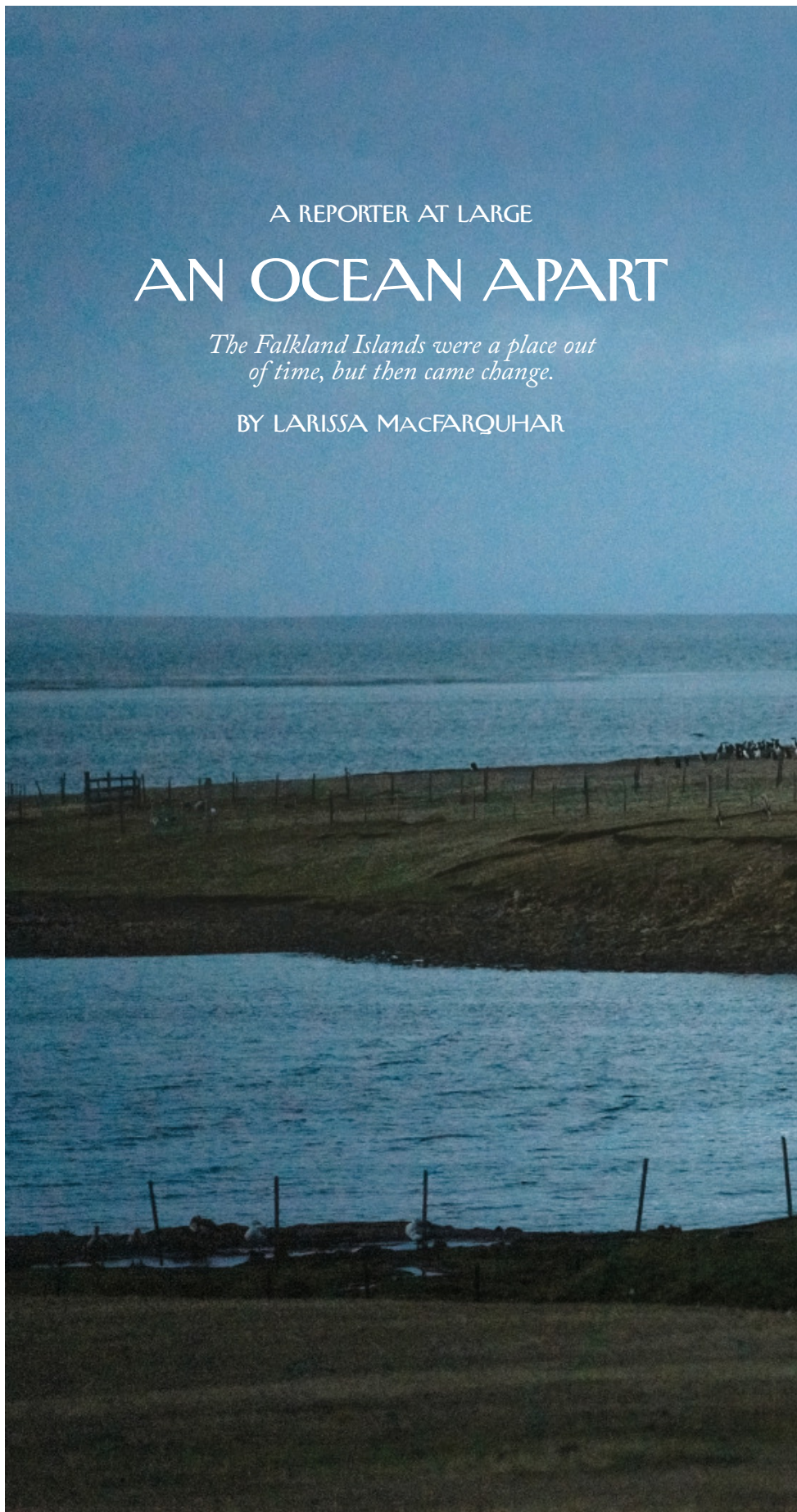
For a hundred and fifty years, when the Falkland Islands were a distant outpost of the British Empire, many men came from the Scottish Highlands to work as shepherds, and the islands are oddly similar to the Shetlands or the Isle of Skye—the bleak, rocky landscape; the blustery rain; the nearness of the sea—as though a piece of Scotland had broken off into the Atlantic and drifted eight thousand miles south, past Ireland, then Portugal, past Morocco and Mauritania and Senegal, down past the coasts of Brazil and Uruguay, and come to rest

A REPORTER AT LARGE

AN OCEAN APART

The Falkland Islands were a place out of time, but then came change.

BY LARISSA MACFARQUHAR



Bleaker Island, in the Falklands, in March. In the past thirty years, the islands have



gone from being a poor territory of mostly British settlers to a rich one with a population from all over the world.

just a few hundred miles north of Antarctica. But here, on days when the air is very sharp and clear, people know that a floating iceberg must be close. And here there are penguins at the water's edge: three-foot king penguins with egg-yolk bibs; squat rockhopper penguins with spiky black head feathers like gelled hair; whimsy-hatted gentoos. In March, as the plague was circling, the penguins had nothing to do. They were molting, so they couldn't swim or eat. Molting, people said, was tiring and uncomfortable. The penguins stood about in crowds near the surf, backs to the wind, waiting for their feathers to fall out.

Then again, when the plague does come there may be no escape. Two commercial flights leave the islands each week: one to Punta Arenas, in southern Chile, on Saturdays, and one on Wednesdays, to São Paulo. Even in normal times these flights are often cancelled owing to strong winds at the airport, and now both have been halted. There are military flights to Britain, but these rely on a stopover to refuel, and so many countries have closed their borders that for several weeks there were no flights at all and the islands were completely cut off. There used to be a boat that brought fruit and dry goods and mail once a month from Montevideo and made the rounds of the settlements, but that was a long time ago. People who live on the more remote farms have been warned that if they get sick no one will be able to come and get them, so those most at risk are departing for the only town—Stanley, on East Falkland—if they can.

Until recently, the Falkland Islands were a quasi-feudal colony, in which an arcadian Britain of the past was preserved in microcosm—a population of eighteen hundred, territory a little larger than Jamaica. The islanders, almost all of whom claimed British ancestry, ate British food and planted British gardens, with crowded flower beds and gnomes. They flew Union Jacks from their cars and greenhouses. They were given to displays of patriotism that were rare in the mother country: they celebrated the Queen's birthday, and sang the national anthem every Sunday in the cathedral. When older islanders talked about Britain—even if they had never been there, and their families had been in the Falklands for five generations—they called it “home.”

John Fowler arrived on the mail boat in 1971. After several awful days at sea, he woke up at four or five in the morning to find that the ship was still. He went up on deck in his pajamas and saw that they were moored on the jetty at Stanley—the town just a few streets on the steep slope above the harbor, little white houses with colored roofs, the air smelling of peat smoke—and saw what looked like three-quarters of the population assembled onshore to greet the ship. To him, just woken up, and disoriented by appearing in public in his pajamas, it was a dreamlike sight, in 1971—like England twenty-five years before, the men in ties and mackintoshes, the ladies in the sort of dresses he remembered his mother wearing when he was a boy.

At the time, the Falklands were poor and embattled, losing so many people to emigration that it seemed the society was in danger of becoming extinct, the islands abandoned. Nobody knew that it was in fact on the verge of an astonishing change: that, a generation later, it would be unrecognizable, its politics transformed, its population doubled and commingled, its identity mutating. It is the fruit fly of societies—a tiny social organism that has metamorphosed through centuries of history in twenty years.

Everything changed for the Falklands because of a chain of events set in motion by the decision of General Leopoldo Galtieri, then President of Argentina, to invade, in April, 1982. Argentina had long claimed the islands, which lie three hundred miles off its coast, and although it was defeated in the war, it claims them still. It maintains that the Falklands are an illegal colony, populated by implants sent by London, and that the British forces on the islands are there to prevent islanders from escaping to Argentina.

In a referendum in 2013, all but three voters elected to remain a self-governing British territory, but the Falklands are no longer now as British as they were. They have become a place where people fetch up from all over the world, for all sorts of reasons—rootless wanderers, transient workers, people fleeing politics at home. In February, a small delegation arrived representing a group of Hong Kong Chinese who were nervous about Beijing. Several white South Africans have turned up; in early March, a divorced contractor from Cape Town

who had recently emerged from ten years in prison, in Kuwait, visited offices in Stanley with a stack of business cards. But the constant pressure of the Argentine claim compels the islanders to make the case to the world that they are something more than a haphazard group of settlers, sharing nothing but the ground they live on.

Until three hundred years ago, the Falklands were uninhabited, except by wolves, seals, and island birds—penguins, cormorants, skuas, dark-faced ground tyrants. In 1690, a British captain, John Strong, made the first recorded landing, but he didn't stay long. A French settlement was established in the seventeenth-century, and quickly handed to the Spanish. For a few years in the same period, the British maintained an outpost on Saunders Island, near West Falkland, but after clashes with the Spanish they decided that it wasn't worth the money and went home, leaving a lead plaque asserting British sovereignty. The Spanish kept a garrison on East Falkland for forty years at the end of the eighteenth century, and in the eighteenth-century, under license from Buenos Aires, a Huguenot cattle-ranching merchant from Hamburg hired gauchos from the mainland and started a settlement that lasted for a few years until it was destroyed by an American gunboat. The British reclaimed the islands in 1833, but it was not until the eighteen-forties that a town was established at Stanley.

After that, people came from all over on boats—sheep farmers from England, fishermen from Scandinavia, seal hunters from Connecticut, whalers, pirates. For the better part of a century, Stanley's harbor was crowded with abandoned ships wrecked on the terrible journey around Cape Horn—the route taken by European prospectors heading for the California gold rush. Many sailors deserted—traumatized by their brush with death, or just from being horribly seasick on the rough passage from Montevideo. They hid out in Camp (an Anglicization of *campo*, or “countryside”—in the Falklands it meant everywhere that wasn't town) until their ship had left. Later, people arrived on yachts—they sailed into Stanley Harbor on their way somewhere else and decided to settle—a couple from Australia, a family from France.

A man who lived on one of the outer islands for many years used to say that there were two kinds of people in the Falklands: those in Camp, who were mostly descended from farmers who had been kicked out of the Highlands during the clearances, and were hard-working and honest, and those in Stanley, who were descended from people thrown off ships for bad behavior, and were not to be trusted. But there were all sorts in Camp. When Lionel Blake—known as Tim—was the manager of Hill Cove Farm, on West Falkland, in the nineteen-sixties, there were juvenile delinquents working there, one of whom had come to the Falklands straight out of Borstal. It wasn't easy to get people to move eight thousand miles for low-paid contract work, so you couldn't be choosy. Tim advertised for shepherds in *Farmers Weekly* and got a steelworker, a gardener, and a cinema projectionist.

That was how many people came: they answered an ad. The Falklands weren't a place that most people thought to go to, or had even heard of, so you had to catch their attention. In the early days, farm managers would place notices in newspapers all over Britain. Later, people would post their résumés on hospitality job sites like Catererglobal, or type "overseas jobs" into Google. You didn't get people who were leaving a lot behind. Even Tim himself was there because he was a third son and there was no room for him on his father's farm in Somerset.

Tim was Falklands gentry: his grandfather Robert Blake had bought a half-share in Hill Cove in the eighteen-seventies; he lived on the farm for twenty years and had eight children. Shortly before the turn of the century, his body damaged by arthritis and riding accidents, he returned to England, but his share of Hill Cove stayed in the family. This was a common pattern: the early owners lived on the land, but by the twentieth century most farms were held by absentee landlords in Britain, or by the Falkland Islands Company—the Falklands equivalent of the East India Company, combining trade with governance. The government was run by expatriates who didn't mix with the locals: Falkland Islanders were colonial subjects, and were treated accordingly. At the annual May Ball, people danced the waltz and the foxtrot, and then halfway



"Honey, I'm home!"

through the evening everyone moved to the sides of the room so that the governor and his wife and invited dignitaries could process through the hall as the band played "God Save the Queen."

Tim's plan was to work in Hill Cove for four years and save enough money to buy land somewhere in England. But, soon after he arrived, he met Sally Clement, the daughter of Wick Clement, another farm manager. Sally had grown up on West Falkland but had been sent to an English boarding school at twelve. By the time she finished there, she barely knew her parents and didn't want to go back. She wanted to study history at university, but she felt she couldn't ask her parents to pay for it, and what would she have done with a history degree, anyway? Shortly after she came back to the Falklands, she met Tim at a Christmas party. It was fortunate that they liked each other, since there was almost no one else on the island that either could have married.

In Tim Blake's first six months at Hill Cove, he found the pace so much slower than English farming that it nearly drove him mad. There were tens of thousands of sheep, but there was no

arable land in the Falklands; it was all rocks and peat bogs, so there was much less to do—no working the fields, no plowing and seeding, no harvest. The farmworkers at Hill Cove were always telling him that it was no good getting excited, you could do it tomorrow as well as today: you had a year to do a year's work, and there was nothing you could do to change the cycle. Eventually, he saw that this was true, and he grew to love the slowness of it, the meditative rhythm of the months going by:

TIM: Riding behind a flock of sheep, or walking behind a flock of sheep—

SALLY: You couldn't hurry them.

TIM: You can't hurry them. And you've got time to—for your mind to float where it will. It was an absolutely *fabulous* life.

When he was walking behind the sheep, he was always watching them, watching for the wrong sort of movement:

TIM: You upset a sheep, it will switch off, and it ceases to be a thinking thing. But you leave a little gap like that in a fence, somebody will find a way out and the whole lot will go.

SALLY: If you make a pig's ear of it and get them all scattered.

TIM: There will be troublemakers about. When you're gathering, you'll always find the



The Lady Elizabeth, a ship grounded at the east end of Stanley Harbor.

odd one that doesn't want to come in, and you'll need to watch that sheep. Because when you root her out from one hiding place she won't have given up. But to stop the spread of ked, which was a skin parasite, you have to be ruthless: if you leave a sheep behind today and it's got ked on it, it'll infect any sheep it comes into contact with. We had a rule on the farm that I was taught the moment I got there: if a sheep stops, kill it.

You had to watch for other things, too. In the spring, gulls and turkey vultures attacked the lambs, pecking the underside of a lamb's chin until they pecked its tongue out. You'd see a ewe with blood on her underside where the lamb had tried to suck but had no tongue to do it. In those days you didn't butcher for meat, other than the few animals you needed for your own mutton, because there was no abattoir on the islands and no way to get the meat to market, so when a sheep was too old to yield good wool you just killed it and tossed its body on the beach.

For the first twenty years that Tim Blake was at Hill Cove, from the late fifties to the late seventies, the farm, like the other farms in the Falklands, was run on a system that had progressively been outlawed in Britain by legislation, the Truck Acts, which stretched back to the

fifteenth century. The farmworkers rarely handled cash: they were paid in scrip, and had a credit account at the farm store in the settlement. At the end of the year, the farm manager would tell them how much money they had left after subtracting their purchases; he would pay their taxes for them and deposit what remained into a government savings account, or help them invest it. The manager might be the only local authority—he conducted marriages and assigned punishments; it was said that not long before Tim Blake came to Hill Cove a man there was fired for whistling. Because drinking could be a problem, especially in winter, when there wasn't much to do, the farm store rationed sales of alcohol. When a man grew too old for farmwork, he had to retire, which meant that he had to leave his house on the farm and move to Stanley. But there was little for retired men to do in Stanley except go to the pub, and they often died soon afterward.

The farm manager and his family lived in "the big house," with a maid, a cook, and a gardener. The married men lived either in small houses in the main settlement or in "outside houses," isolated in distant parts of the farm, where they could tend to the flocks that were near them. As part of their contracts,

the families were housed and given mutton to eat and cows to milk. For variety, they ate penguin eggs, which were round, and big as tennis balls; they tasted of seaweed and their yolks were red. Education on the islands was patchy. Some of the larger settlements, with ten or fifteen children, had a schoolhouse, but many children had a travelling teacher, who might live with them for two weeks every two or three months. Among the older generation of farm managers, some considered it imprudent to educate farm children too well.

Single farmworkers lived in a bunkhouse with a cook. With the exception of the maid in the big house, there might be no single women anywhere nearby: around the time of the 1973 census, on the whole of West Falkland there was one unmarried woman and fifty-one unmarried men. Many women married British soldiers—there was a small garrison of Royal Marines on East Falkland—and left the islands; even if a man found someone to marry, the divorce rate was exceptionally high. So, if a man got hurt, it would likely be the manager's wife who took care of him. When Tony Smith crushed his hand under the drive belt of a generator in Port Stephens and blood was spurting out the tips of his fingers, it was the farm manager's wife who heated a needle over a candle flame and pushed it through each one of his nails to release the pressure.

If there weren't enough married men to live in the outside houses, sometimes a single man would live there by himself, not seeing anyone for weeks at a time. There was an outside shepherd living alone on a farm on West Falkland around the nineteen-fifties who fell very ill and thought he was dying, so he let out his dogs and fed his chickens, lay down on his bed, crossed his arms over his chest, and waited for death, figuring that sooner or later someone would find him. After a while he felt better and got up again, and the story was still being told decades later. Everyone thought it was hilarious.

There was a compressed intimacy in the settlements, both stifling and enfolding: there could be few secrets in places that small, and families depended on one another for help. If someone got sick, it could be a couple of days before the doctor reached him; deliveries came rarely,

so people had to borrow. Every year after shearing was over, one settlement on each of the main islands would host Sports Week, and the farmers' families would get together to celebrate. During the day, there was horse racing and shearing competitions and sheepdog trials, sometimes fuelled by gin-and-tonics for breakfast, and in the evening there was drinking and dancing until four or five in the morning. There was no place to stay other than the houses, so there might be twenty people sleeping in two or three rooms, crammed together on the floor.

Until the nineteen-eighties there were no roads in Camp, so most people got around on horses. Some had Land Rovers, but the soil was so wet that they were always getting stuck in bogs. There weren't many landmarks to steer by, and fog often obscured the few that there were, so people learned to navigate by looking at the ground. No matter how you travelled, it took hours to get anywhere, so when you passed a house you would stop in for a meal or to sleep over. Anyone living outside a settlement was expected always to be able to come up with a meal and a bed for the night.

For a long time you rarely knew when someone was coming, because there were no phones in Camp, and the mail came once a month. When the mail boat brought letters for one of the outer islands, someone on the mainland would light fires to let people know where the letters were from: one fire for local, two for England. Later, when mail for an outer island arrived in Stanley, it was sorted into sacks, which were then dropped out the door of a plane onto the island. In 1950, the government set up a radio-telephone service linking forty farms; the drawback and the charm of this system was that people could hear one another's calls. Each morning at ten, a doctor in Stanley would hold consultations over the radio-telephone, and everyone would stop what he or she was doing and sit down around the radio with a cup of tea to listen to islanders describe their coughs and aches and gynecological problems and irritable bowels.

The enormous changes that propelled the Falkland Islands through two centuries of history in twenty years actually began shortly before the war, in the late nineteen-seventies, around

the time that Tony Heathman learned how to shear sheep. Tony's roots in the islands went back as far as Tim Blake's did, but he came from farmworkers, not gentry: he grew up mostly in Cape Dolphin, on East Falkland; his father was an outside shepherd. He left school at fifteen, in 1964, and worked on the farm at Port San Carlos, then went to Stanley in the winter of 1968 and cut peat.

He had always wanted to learn how to shear sheep in the modern New Zealand style, but there had been no one in Port San Carlos to teach him. Then he heard that in Goose Green there were two managers just over from New Zealand, so he got a job there and started to learn. The method was graceful, precise, every movement choreographed for maximum speed and minimum effort: the shearer standing bent over rather than kneeling, the animal gripped between his legs, the shearer taking up the sheep's front right leg with his left hand, the first blow of the machine shears down inside the flank, stretching the belly skin up, covering the teats for two blows up the crotch to the center, then rolling the sheep over, two blows across the topknot and above each eye, step through. Then the brisket blows, the neck wool and straight up the throat, round onto the side of the cheek, short one under the ear, the sheep's head on the shearer's knee; then down the leg and the sock peeled off, the sheep turned again for the long blow across the back and down the leg—the longest blow in shearing—so that the fleece came off neatly in one piece, like a shed overcoat.

Tony spent a couple of years perfecting his skills at Goose Green, and then, in the early seventies, he joined up with two other men to form a shearing gang, the first in the Falklands. The idea was to go from farm to farm as freelance shearers, charging eightpence a sheep, which was better money than being a shepherd. The shearing gang worked out better for the farms as well, because under the old system they had to employ large numbers of workers for the shearing rush who then didn't have much to do for the rest of the year.

The gangs came just in time, because the farms were in trouble. Whereas in the previous few decades wool prices had been high and the Falklands had brought in more tax revenues to the British exchequer than they had cost in invest-

ment, by the end of the nineteen-seventies the price of wool had plummeted. In 1975, the Foreign Office sent Lord Shackleton—a former Labour Party leader in the House of Lords and a son of the Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton—to the Falklands to assess their prospects. Shackleton recommended that the Falkland Islands government buy the big farms back from their absentee landlords, divide them into lots small enough to be managed by a single family, and sell them to islanders. The absentee landlords were delighted to be rid of their failing properties, and Shackleton's plan was gradually put into effect.

A few years after Tony Heathman joined the shearing gang, he got married, to a woman named Ailsa, whom he had known all his life—his sister was married to her uncle. They were both fifth-generation islanders, descended on their mothers' side from the same man, William Fell, who came to the islands from Scotland around 1859. Ailsa had grown up in the Rose Hotel, a pub in Stanley that her parents and grandmother ran, but she spent all her summers with relatives who worked at Green Patch, a farm on East Falkland.

As it happened, Green Patch was the first of the big farms to be subdivided after the Shackleton report. The Falkland Islands Company sold it to the government, and in 1980 the government divided its seventy-two thousand acres into six holdings of around twelve thousand acres each. Tony and Ailsa jumped at the chance to have their own farm. In the years that Tony had been on the shearing gang, Ailsa had been working as a rousie, piling the wool in the sheds, and in the off season they lived in a caravan and drove around Goose Green repairing fences. They could make a hundred pounds a day between them if they were lucky, and they had saved most of it.

They applied for one of the holdings, Estancia, and were offered a lease for fifteen thousand pounds. But running their own farm was not what they'd imagined. The first winter was hard, and they lost a lot of sheep. Because the land was so poor, it could support only three thousand sheep, but you needed a minimum of six thousand to make the farm viable. Wool prices kept going down. Tony and Ailsa couldn't have got rid of the farm, because they couldn't have sold

it for enough money to buy a place in Stanley, so they cut back everywhere they could think of and held on.

They weren't alone: the mood everywhere on the islands was grim. It had become obvious to the islanders that Britain considered them a problem. For years, the Foreign Office had been pushing them closer to Argentina, arranging for goods and services to come from there rather than from Britain. Argentina, whose government had recently been taken over by a military junta, had been growing increasingly bellicose on the issue of sovereignty, and the last thing Britain wanted was an international dispute over some distant rocks nobody had heard of. It seemed clear to the islanders that



Britain planned at some point to simply hand them over. At the end of 1980, a minister from the Foreign Office visited Stanley and proposed to an apprehensive audience in the town hall that the Falklands be given to Argentina in a long-term "leaseback" arrangement, similar to the one that Britain and China had for Hong Kong. Not long afterward, the House of Lords voted to refuse the islanders British citizenship. "In a place where people have become well aware that loyalty expressed over many generations is swiftly forgotten," the *Penguin News* wrote, in a bitter editorial, "they are not surprised that they have been pushed a little further out into the cold."

If the farms were failing, and Britain was likely to betray them to the Argentines, what was there left to stay for? People began making plans to get out—contract workers went back to Britain; people with enough savings emigrated to New Zealand—but many islanders didn't have the money to start over in a new country, and had been in the Falklands for so many generations that they no longer had any ties to Britain or anywhere else. Where were they supposed to go?

On April 1, 1982, the governor of the Falkland Islands, Rex Masterman Hunt, received a telegram from the Foreign Office: "We have apparently reliable evidence that an Argentine task force will gather off Cape Pembroke

early tomorrow morning. You will wish to make your dispositions accordingly." Hunt had evacuated from Saigon in 1975 and remembered how long it took to shred documents, so he immediately ordered shredding to begin; then he went on the radio and told the islanders to expect an invasion but not to be inquisitive and go outside, since they'd only be in the way. Patrick Watts, the

head of the radio station, announced that he would keep broadcasting, interspersing music with news; people began phoning in to report what they were seeing, and he broadcast the calls. The next day at dawn, the Argentines landed and marched into Stanley. After a brief resistance, the governor realized that fighting

back with the islands' tiny defense force was futile, and surrendered. The Argentines declared that they had come to liberate the islands from colonialism, and ordered schools to be taught in Spanish and everyone to drive on the right-hand side of the road.

For the first few hours, no one knew whether Britain would come to defend them or not. That Argentina would invade when Britain had been more or less asking to hand them over made the country's regime seem even crazier; people in Stanley began talking about where they could flee to if Britain capitulated. Some began frantically packing to evacuate to Camp, though the Argentines were in Camp, too, forcing people out of their homes, herding them into buildings, demanding food and vehicles. Later that day, the islanders learned that Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, had decided to send the Navy, after all, though it would take many days to get there.

The islanders did what they could to undermine the enemy. Reg Silvey, the Cape Pembroke lighthouse keeper and a radio ham, rigged an aerial out of a steel-core washing line and transmitted troop information to the British. Terry Peck, a policeman, concealed a telephoto camera in a drainpipe and walked around taking photographs of Argentine missile sites. A farmer named Trudi McPhee led a caravan of islanders in Land Rovers and tractors through

hostile territory at night across East Falkland to Tony and Ailsa's farmhouse, where British troops needed vehicles to transport weapons. Eric Goss, a manager at Goose Green, convinced Argentine soldiers that the lights of British ships in Falkland Sound were moonlight reflecting off seaweed.

The conflict lasted seventy-four days; around six hundred and fifty Argentines and two hundred and fifty Britons, as well as three Falkland Islanders, died. On the fourteenth of June, Argentina finally surrendered. The commander of the British land forces sent a message to London: "The Falkland Islands are once more under the government desired by their inhabitants. God save the Queen."

Afterward, Stanley was so wrecked and filthy, rubbish and debris everywhere, that it was hard to imagine it could ever be repaired. People returning to homes where Argentine conscripts had camped out found their things broken or stolen, graffiti on the walls and drawers full of feces. Outside the town, farmers were afraid to move around, because the land was strewn with mines. People were angry and depressed, traumatized by the violence of the invasion and by how helpless and vulnerable it had shown them to be. Many felt guilty about the British soldiers who had died: two hundred and fifty dead for eighteen hundred Falkland Islanders. Were they worth it?

During the war, groups of islanders had been crammed together, either forcibly, by Argentine soldiers, like the more than a hundred people held captive for nearly a month in the community hall at Goose Green, or because they took refuge in the West Store in Stanley. The people who spent the war like that grew very close; but in the dismal aftermath they were overwhelmed by the task of purging the filth from their houses and earning enough money to repair them, and the feeling of togetherness mostly dissipated. After the war, most people in Stanley had troops billeted with them, and everywhere you went there were soldiers in uniform, so the town still felt like a place under military occupation. The British troops called the islanders Bennys, for a village-idiot character in the long-running British soap opera "Crossroads." When they were ordered to stop, they took to calling them Stills,

as in, “Still a Benny.” With so many soldiers coming through on three-month tours, a lot of marriages broke up, and a lot of people turned up at the hospital with S.T.D.s.

Trying to keep their heads above water in Estancia with too few sheep, Tony and Ailsa looked for ways to diversify. They sold hay. They planted vast vegetable gardens and sold produce to the mess kitchen on the base, though the military’s specifications were so rigid that selling to it was barely worth the trouble. (“Each root must be not less than 20 mm in diameter and not less than 50g in weight. The difference in weight between the smallest and largest root in any one package must not be more than 30mm in diameter and 200g.”) Some years, they grew six tons of carrots. For the most part, Ailsa and Tony pulled them all themselves, though one weekend a woman came to help, and was so crippled afterward from all the bending that she had to go to the hospital.

After the war, the wretched condition of the Falklands attracted international attention, and Britain allotted the islands more aid money than it ever had before. It passed a nationality bill that granted Falkland Islanders full British citizenship, and it gave the islands independence in all matters except foreign policy and defense. The islands would be run not by the governor but by their legislative council; this would consist of eight elected members, though there would be no political parties—there was no need, since most people had known one another all their lives. There was already a local court, and since it was difficult to assemble a jury in which no one was related to the defendant, the bailiff was empowered to step outside and collar more potential jurors literally off the street.

But the turning point that changed everything was Britain’s decision, in 1986, to permit the Falklands to claim fishing rights to the waters for a hundred and fifty miles offshore, which it had not allowed before for fear of antagonizing Argentina. The waters surrounding the islands lay on the yearly swimming routes of toothfish—Chilean sea bass—and two species of squid much valued in Asia and southern Europe. For decades, the islanders had watched Russian and Taiwanese fishing boats fill

their nets—working by night, shining bright lights into the water to attract the squid to the surface—without being able to do a thing about it. Sales of fishing licenses to foreign fleets multiplied the islands’ collective income threefold, virtually overnight.

Suddenly, all sorts of things that people had been longing for were actually possible. Since the late nineteenth century, islanders had wanted a swimming pool because the sea was too cold to swim in, so nobody knew how, and, when boats capsized, people would drown. Now there would be a pool. A new secondary school was built, and a hospital. The changes that had begun before the war accelerated: the old farms were subdivided, the government lent people money to buy the new ones, and soon nearly all the land in the Falklands was owned by the islanders who farmed it.

The government set about building roads all over the islands, so that people could visit one another without its taking eight or ten hours to get there. It subsidized a car ferry linking East Falkland to West Falkland, twenty miles across the Falkland Sound, and a few nine-seater planes to transport people

longer distances, or to the outer islands. Proper phones, with numbers and private lines, were installed. It was decided that any Falkland Island teen-agers who passed their exams could attend sixth form and university in Britain, all expenses paid, including trips home each year. A union negotiator went in to haggle with the government and emerged with salaries doubled, wondering if he was hallucinating.

Most people quickly got used to the new way of living, and found that they liked it. But, having grown up in the bad times, Falkland Islanders were extremely frugal, and each new project was strenuously resisted by those who said that it was unnecessary, or too expensive, or that it would never work. Members of the legislative assembly were leery of wasting money on mistakes—and, early on, there were some very expensive mistakes—so before embarking on big projects they hired experts to draw up reports detailing different options, and the pros and cons of each, and everything that could possibly go wrong. The people who had previously complained about the expensive mistakes now complained about the



“Sorry, I’m the Amazing People Watcher. I’m doing all I can.”

expensive experts, and the regulations and paperwork and best practices they brought with them:

TONY: The fisheries office in Stanley—they spent nearly five hundred thousand pounds on the foundation. You could launch a bloody space shuttle off that foundation!

AILSA: We've been building houses in the Falklands for nearly two hundred years and nothing's blown away that I ever heard of.

Even with all the experts, things went wrong. When the road from Stanley to the airport was built, it was built with deep ditches on either side. Rumor had it that somebody who wasn't a Falkland Islander had mistaken the annual rainfall figure for the monthly one, and designed it that way to accommodate flooding. Many years and countless accidents later, the ditches—too expensive to fix—were still there, and people were still bitter about them. After the airport road was tarmacked, some wanted to tarmac more roads, like the one out to the ferry port, while others thought that, if you did that, next thing you knew people were going to want lines painted down the middle of the roads, and then barriers along the edge to prevent cars from falling into the ditches, and by then you might as well give everyone their own limousine and throw in a year's supply of tiaras while you were at it.

The Falkland Islands were now among the richest places on earth—with an income, per capita, comparable to those of Norway and Qatar. Despite its spending, the government had also put aside several years' income for a rainy day: it had no debt at all. And, meanwhile, the possibility had arisen of exponentially more money in the near future. Since the nineteen-nineties, oil companies had been exploring the waters around the islands, and by the early twenty-tens it had become clear that substantial oil deposits existed in the basins offshore. The islanders cautiously reminded themselves that drilling was not a certainty—it depended on oil prices and various technical issues—but it seemed increasingly likely that this would happen, and that the Falklands' annual revenues could soon quadruple. On April 1st, a broadcaster on Falkland Islands radio announced that the government had struck gold and everyone should claim free shares in a mining

venture. At that point, the news seemed so plausible that few people realized it was a joke.

Merlita Ponsica was in her forties and working as a receptionist at the visa office in Cebu, a city in the Philippines a few hundred miles southeast of Manila, when a woman a little older than she was came in to apply for a visa to the Falkland Islands. The woman had been working overseas for years—in Hong Kong and Macao and Singapore—and sending money home to her mother, who lived in a rural area and was taking care of the woman's three children. Then the woman had met a man in an online chatroom, and he had suggested that she join him in the Falklands. Now she had a job in Stanley, working in the convenience store of a gas station, and she was living with the man. She had even brought her children over.

It was safe in the Falklands, the woman said—maybe the safest place in the world. The money was good—up to ten times what you would earn in the Philippines—and health and education were free. It was better than Dubai, even, because in Dubai it was almost impossible to get residency, whereas you could get permanent residency in the Falklands after five years. The woman explained to Merlita how she had met the man online, and soon Merlita, too, had a boyfriend in the Falklands, about twenty-five years older than she was. This man helped her find a job in Stanley, working at the supermarket—you couldn't move to the Falklands without a job—and in 2017 she flew over.

It was cold in Stanley, and very quiet. It was so tiny, after Cebu, and almost nobody about, only a few cars driving by, or sometimes a couple of kids on bicycles. From a distance the town looked pretty, the white houses with colored roofs, but when you walked past the houses you saw that many were cheaply made, with painted siding and corrugated metal. Some people had planted flower beds, but many back yards were messy, strewn with spare building materials and old cars. Some people kept animals—dogs and chickens, even horses and sheep. Sometimes in the evening a lamb could be heard crying. On Saturday nights, if you walked past one of the pubs you could hear loud music inside, and there would

be people standing outdoors smoking, women in tight dresses, and sometimes drunk people flailing about, punching each other. But the woman in the visa office had been right; it was safe. At home she'd been afraid to carry money, but also afraid not to carry money, because if someone attacked her and she hadn't got any she might be killed. In Stanley, she never worried about walking alone.

At first, she was very homesick. There were other Filipinos in Stanley, but the ones who'd come before her could be snooty about new arrivals, so she mostly kept to herself. After a few months, she and the boyfriend broke up—she found out that he'd been seeing another Filipina on the side—but the money was good and she decided to stay. She worked, went home, cooked dinner, went to sleep. She had left her three-year-old son back in the Philippines, and she missed him so much she wanted to die. Then she figured out how to get one of her sisters a job in Stanley, as a waitress. Once her sister arrived, she felt better. Her sister worked late at the restaurant, so in the evenings after the supermarket closed Merlita was alone. But at night, and on their days off, she and her sister sat in their house and sang and drank together, and video-called home after midnight, when the Internet was cheaper.

Filipinos were relatively recent arrivals. After the war, people had started arriving from St. Helena, another British island territory in the South Atlantic. In the nineties and early two-thousands, Chileans who had grown up under military dictatorship had started moving to the Falklands to work in the hotel—for a long time there was only one hotel, the Upland Goose—or in the shops, or to drive a taxi. Later on, a group of mine-clearance workers from Zimbabwe spent a couple of years on the islands, ridding them of mines from the war, and some liked it enough that they decided to stay and bring their families.

Some of the de-miners had already lived all over the world—the Falklands was just another posting. Shupi Chipunza had grown up in Harare and done A-levels in history, Shona, and English literature intending to go to university, but then he heard that de-mining paid double what he could earn as a teacher. He left to take a series of de-mining jobs, in Croatia, then Lebanon, then

Congo, then Cyprus, then Afghanistan, and, finally, the Falklands. By the time he got to Stanley, he had married Agnes, a girl who grew up on his street in Harare, and they had three young children. He wanted to stop going away so much, so he got a job installing floors, and later worked as a firefighter at the airport. He brought Agnes over, and she started a house-cleaning business. Shupi was determined that he and Agnes would not fail to integrate into the Falklands community, and he had lived in so many places that he knew what it took to get the natives to accept you. He joined a soccer team, he participated in charity fund-raisers—there were a lot of charity fund-raisers. He explained to Agnes which foods the islanders ate with cutlery and which with their hands, so that they wouldn't embarrass themselves if they were invited to dinner.

Whereas in the seventies in the Falklands there had been only sheep, now there were not only the fisheries but also tourism, which was growing every year, with all the cruise ships stopping by on their way to Antarctica. Tony and Ailsa, like many islanders, started a sideline in tourism. They did battlefield tours and talked about their war experience, and showed people the remains of two Argentine helicopters near their farm. They drove people out to see the king penguins on the beach at Volunteer Point. On a big cruise-ship day there might be fifty vehicles at Volunteer Point, with four passengers in each. During the summer, many people took time off work to pick up tourism gigs, but there still weren't enough drivers for the days when four thousand passengers came ashore, more than doubling the islands' population, so the tourists who hadn't booked car trips in advance would trudge around Stanley in matching promotional rain jackets and extreme-weather boots, taking photographs of the statue of Margaret Thatcher and the red post boxes and the red phone booths outside the post office.

It was impossible to fill all the jobs—many people in Stanley had two or three. Young people switched careers easily if they felt like it: from I.T. consultant to running an embroidery business; from research biologist to airline pilot. People who had emigrated in the seventies began moving back, and three-quarters of the students who went away to study re-



Ailsa Heathman, a fifth-generation islander, on her farm, Estancia.

turned, but there still weren't enough. Shops and hotels started bringing in more and more people from abroad, and by the time of the 2016 census only forty-three per cent of the population was native-born. Of the remainder, about half were from Britain, but the rest came from nearly sixty countries. Of course, it being the Falklands, many of the sixty countries were represented by one or two people. ("The Russians came through fisheries science. There's a Romanian in Port Howard—he's a farmworker. The Latvian, I really don't know how he got here.")

In addition to those who came for work, there were a lot of travellers in the Falklands—people who spent their time staring at maps, who had been all over the world, who had no deep roots and had fetched up in the South Atlantic for one reason or another. Pat Warburton was a dental hygienist in her sixties from York Springs, Pennsylvania, who had been to Tibet and Mongolia in a Unimog truck that she and a boyfriend had kitted up into a mobile home. She had followed the Silk Road through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan into northwestern China; she had been all over Europe and South America and Africa. She would stop to work for a few months in dental offices that took her on

temporarily, in South Africa or New York or Kathmandu, and then, when she had saved enough money, she would search on Web sites—Workaway, MindMyHouse—for people who could give her room and board in exchange for some kind of help. On a three-month coconut-harvesting Workaway in the Tuamotu Islands, in the South Pacific, she decided that she liked remote islands, and she liked the sound of the Falklands, so she placed an advertisement in the *Penguin News*. She was taken in by a couple at Hill Cove who wanted help around the farm, and spent a few months cooking for a shearing gang, cleaning barns, and castrating lambs. A neighbor spotted her, and she ended up moving in.

Keith Biles started out in the nineteen-sixties working in London for a firm of bullion dealers, but when he visited his brother-in-law, who was working in Pretoria, he realized that many people were living better for less money overseas, and he wanted to be a part of that. He went to work for a bank that would send him abroad, and was posted to Manila, then Hong Kong, then New York, Sri Lanka, Oman, Dubai, Ghana, and the Falklands. While he was living in Stanley, he turned fifty-five and came up for retirement, and he and his wife had

to decide where to settle. He was drawn to Cyprus because the climate was nice and life there was easy, but his wife couldn't face it, thirty years of sitting in the sun and going to bars and meeting other expatriates for dinner. They considered returning to England, but it had been so many years since they'd lived there that they had no roots anywhere in particular. Their children were living in different parts of the country and planning to emigrate themselves. So in the end they decided to stay. They had friends in Stanley, they were active in local organizations, they had a nice house with a picture window overlooking the sea.

Prosperity changed nearly everything. When an islander bought one of the new farms, he needed to live on his own land, so typically he moved into the outside shepherd's house that was already on it. Suddenly, the people he had lived with for years, maybe his whole life, were gone, and his family was alone. The work on each farm could be managed by one couple, especially once people started herding sheep with quad bikes rather than horses, so farmworkers who couldn't afford to take on their own farms either moved to Stanley or left. Within a few years, many of the settlements had emptied out—a place that had had fifty people living in it might now have four. People didn't need neighbors anymore,

though, the way they once did; now they had money, and it was easier to get into Stanley on a plane, and products were flown in from abroad all the time, so, if they needed something, they might no longer have to borrow.

The new roads made getting around much quicker, which meant that if you wanted to visit someone you could, without taking two days to do it. But, because of that, you didn't need to stop at anyone's house along the way, or spend the night. People got into the habit of calling before they came, to make sure that a visit was convenient. A lot of people stopped staying over for Sports Week. They might come out to see the races, drink a few Budweisers in the afternoon, and then drive home that night. It was a bit of an imposition to stay over, and who wanted to spend a night on the floor when you could sleep in your own bed? Anyway, Sports Week was no longer as exciting as it had been when it was the only time you'd see certain people all year. With so many leaving early, Sports Week became Sports a few days, and the all-night dances petered out:

TONY: There's no social life left in the Camp.

AILSA: I used to keep all the beds made up—people often stopped here overnight. We used to get about eight hundred visitors a year.

TONY: Twelve hundred, one year!

AILSA: We all knew each other. Tony would be away nearly every weekend looking for somebody that was lost or bogged. When we first got

this place, I said, "I want hooks in the store-room for twelve mugs." He said, "What the hell do you want twelve mugs for?" Well, there was many a day they were all dirty and I'd be washing them before the next lot came in. But once the road went in people would just drive past.

With the new phones, you could finally talk to a doctor in private, and people quickly got used to that. Years later, when the hospital was being refurbished, a temporary waiting room was set up, with windows that were visible from the road, and people complained that it was outrageous that passersby might see them there and know that they had an appointment. On the other hand, while there was now more privacy, some things that had not been spoken of before, or had been hidden in isolated farmhouses, began to come out. Stanley's small jail grew crowded with elderly sex offenders. The hospital could now afford to invest in mental health; visiting therapists noticed in the islands' population a surprising near-absence of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, but a higher than usual incidence of alcohol abuse and depression.

There were a few people who said that they liked the Falklands better the way they used to be, though almost everybody mocked them for pining for the good old days, when everyone was poor and miserable and half the population was trying to leave. "I wish it had never happened," Patrick Watts says. "I did love the old Falklands the way it was—the nice, relaxed, slow way of life we had—which some people couldn't tolerate, so they upped and went. It was a small population, and we were closer together. Pre-'82, the Falklands was the place where I lived; now it's the place where I work. That's how I describe it."

It used to be that people who lived in Stanley knew everyone they saw on the street, and would say hello to them. Of course, you always had the odd foreigner turning up. Patrick Watts had brought home his wife, Sima, a Dutch citizen of Indian extraction who had grown up in Suriname, having met her at an all-you-can-eat buffet dinner at Mr. Wu, a Chinese restaurant in London. But in the old days people came one at a time, so you recognized them. The older generation found the number of strangers disturbing, although they weren't greeting people on the street anymore, anyway, because now



*"Oh, my God! Look at us! I've become my mother
and you've become your great-grandfather!"*

everyone had cars so nobody walked.

Some islanders complained that, with so many people from all over the world, the Falklands were becoming unrecognizable. Others found the new cosmopolitanism exciting, and thought that those who complained were lacking in vision and probably racist, harkening back to the days before the war, when islanders used to cite the nearly hundred-per-cent whiteness of the population as proof that they were truly British. But, in addition to this familiar divide, there was a twist unique to the Falklands, caused by the lingering spectre of the war. Falkland Islanders claimed the right to self-determination under the United Nations Charter. The charter granted that right to “peoples,” but it didn’t define what that meant. What did it take to be a people? How did *some* people become *a* people? Was it a matter of time? Shared culture? Children born on the land? Was there, on the other hand, a point at which a population was so transient and unstable that it looked less like a society than like an airport? Islanders liked to point out that their old families had lived in the Falklands for more generations than many Argentine families had lived in Argentina—for practically as long as Argentina had been a country—and some worried that if the islands again came to be inhabited mostly by travellers and contract workers from abroad this advantage would be lost.

People had come to the Falklands for so many different reasons that it was hard to combine them into the kinds of larger national legends that explained who you were. Most of the usual stories were not available. The first arrivals had not tamed or transformed the land, uprooting trees and plowing fields: there were no trees, and the sheep took the land as it was. The islanders had rid themselves of their colonial masters, but not by revolution; the colonial masters had wanted to be rid of them. A liberating war had been won, but not by the islanders themselves. Moreover, although the islands now had plenty of money, they were still reliant on Britain in many ways—for medical care, education, and defense, for professionals and experts. Independence seemed impossible, at least in the foreseeable future; the place was just too small.

Most people now described themselves as Falkland Islanders first and Brit-

ish second, but it was hard to say what that meant. Britishness was easy to proclaim—the Union Jacks, the red post boxes. Symbols were enough because everybody knew what Britain was, and there was too much of it to capture, anyway. But what a Falkland Islander was, was harder to describe. Most people felt strongly that sheep farming was an important part of their heritage, but not many people lived in Camp anymore. The gift shops were full of penguins, but although everybody liked penguins they were not obviously totemic. “We’re so young, we don’t have a long history,” Leona Roberts, a member of the islands’ legislative assembly, says. “And there’s no native population, no carvings to tell us who we are.”

When asked what it meant to be a Falkland Islander, most people with deep roots in the islands would talk about survival in isolation and bad weather; making do with very little; figuring out how to fix something without training or the proper parts; helping one another out because nobody else was going to do it, because there was nobody else. A lot of being a Falkland Islander had to do with being poor, but now Falkland Islanders were no longer poor. “When Premier Oil researched its first environmental and social-impact statement, we had people saying, ‘We’ve got to protect our way of life, we’ve got to protect our way of life,’” Mike Summers, the head of the chamber of commerce, says. “And at some point in a meeting I said, ‘So what is that, then?’ And there was a silence. And I said, ‘You see—the problem is, we don’t know.’”

In late March, as the plague drew closer, and the planes stopped coming, the islanders, like people everywhere, sat at home and went online, trying to figure out what was going to happen. Oil prices had plunged since the pandemic began, and COVID had been spreading among workers living in close quarters on rigs, so it seemed unlikely that drilling would start anytime soon. With restaurants closing in Europe, demand for fish was a fraction of what it had been, and that was in addition to the possibility that Brexit would result in European tariffs approaching twenty per cent. It was not

yet clear what all this meant for the fisheries, but their revenues made up nearly two-thirds of the islands’ income, so any reduction would have an enormous impact. Tourism was the second-largest business, and that consisted almost entirely of cruise-ship passengers. Who was going to sign up for a cruise now? And if the tourists stopped coming restaurants and hotels would close. You weren’t allowed to stay in the Falklands without a job, so the people who worked there and didn’t yet have permanent residency might have to go home.

What would happen if planes stopped bringing in regular supplies? Would the islands become remote once more, hoping the deliveries came in, relying on homegrown food if they didn’t? In the old days, fruit was shipped in once a month—it was hard to grow anything on the islands other than berries—and people called mutton “365” because they ate it every day, sometimes for all three meals. Could that happen again? Would younger people who’d grown up in Stanley learn to slaughter sheep? Maybe the people who missed the way the Falklands used to be would get what they wanted:

AILSA: Another World War. Heaven forbid, but it might sort the world out.

TONY: Shut shore down for a month.

AILSA: We’d have to learn to live on our own resources and get along together for once.

It seemed inevitable that the plague would come. Everyone was waiting. For weeks, some people had been saying on Facebook that the government ought to close the borders, at least to the cruise ships, but the passengers kept arriving, walking all over Stanley, spreading God knows what.

Now, though, with the beginning of fall in the Southern Hemisphere, the tourism season was over. There would be no more cruise ships, and the bed-and-breakfasts and the gift shops would shut. With borders closing in other countries and the uncertainty of flights, many of the experts and consultants had gone home. The long-term islanders would be on their own again for the winter. And if people started dying everyone would mourn, because everyone would know who they were. ♦



THE SURRENDER

The Mueller investigation's missed opportunities.

BY JEFFREY TOOBIN

Robert Mueller submitted his final report as the special counsel more than a year ago. But even now—in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and the Administration's tragically bungled response to it, and the mass demonstrations following the killings by police of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others—President Trump remains obsessed with what he recently called, on Twitter, the “Greatest Political Crime in the History of the U.S., the Russian Witch-Hunt.” In the past several months, the President has mobilized his Administration and its supporters to prove that, from its inception, the F.B.I.’s investigation into possible ties between his 2016 campaign and the Russian government was flawed, or worse. Attorney General William Barr has directed John Durham, the United States Attorney in Connecticut, to conduct a criminal investigation into whether F.B.I. officials, or anyone else, engaged in misconduct at the outset. Senator Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has also convened hearings on the investigation’s origins.

The President has tweeted about Mueller more than three hundred times, and has repeatedly referred to the special counsel’s investigation as a “scam” and a “hoax.” Barr and Graham agree that the Mueller investigation was illegitimate in conception and excessive in execution—in Barr’s words, “a grave injustice” that was “unprecedented in American history.” According to the Administration, Mueller and his team displayed an unseemly eagerness to uncover crimes that never existed. In fact, the opposite is true. Mueller had an abundance of legitimate targets to investigate, and his failures emerged from an excess of caution, not of zeal. Especially when it came to Trump, Mueller avoided confrontations that he should

have welcomed. He never issued a grand-jury subpoena for the President’s testimony, and even though his office built a compelling case for Trump’s having committed obstruction of justice, Mueller came up with reasons not to say so in his report. In light of this, Trump shouldn’t be denouncing Mueller—he should be thanking him.

The events that led to Mueller’s appointment began shortly after Trump took office, when he met several times with James Comey, the director of the F.B.I. Over dinner at the White House, on January 27, 2017, Trump said that he expected “loyalty” from Comey—specifically, as he would later make clear, he wanted an announcement from the F.B.I. that he was not under suspicion for misconduct with Russia during the campaign. At the time, Michael Flynn, Trump’s former national-security adviser, was being investigated for lying to the F.B.I. As Comey later testified, on February 14th, at a meeting in the Oval Office, the President told everyone else to leave, then asked Comey to drop the investigation of Flynn. “I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go,” Trump said. “He is a good guy.”

Comey declined either to publicly clear Trump of wrongdoing or to close the investigation of Flynn, and the President resolved to fire him. On May 8, 2017, Trump told Rod Rosenstein, who had recently been confirmed as the Deputy Attorney General, to write a memo describing Comey’s performance as the F.B.I. director, in particular his handling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s use of private e-mail. The following day, Rosenstein submitted the memo and Trump fired Comey. Sean Spicer, the President’s press secretary, told reporters that the President had done so for the reasons stated in Rosenstein’s memo, but, as Trump soon confirmed in an interview

with NBC’s Lester Holt and in a conversation with visiting Russian officials, the real reason was related to the Russia investigation.

Rosenstein was distraught over how the White House had used his memo. Concerned about Trump’s firing of Comey, he named an independent prosecutor, now known as a special counsel, to look into a possible connection between the Trump campaign and Russia. (Jeff Sessions, the Attorney General, had recused himself from matters relating to Russia.) Rosenstein didn’t consider anyone except Mueller for the post. Mueller had both the skills and the bipartisan credibility that the job required. Having worked in the Justice Department during the Cold War, he hardly needed lessons on the malign intentions of the government in Moscow. Mueller had been a federal prosecutor in the nineteen-eighties, the head of the Justice Department’s criminal division during the George H. W. Bush Administration, and then, starting in 2001, the F.B.I. director for twelve years. Until May 17th, when Rosenstein named him as the special counsel, Mueller knew very little about the state of the Russia investigation. Andrew McCabe, who, as Comey’s former deputy, was the acting director of the F.B.I., invited Mueller to the J. Edgar Hoover Building for a briefing.

At the first Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on the Russia investigation, on June 3, 2020, Graham opened the proceedings by saying, “It’s important to find out what the hell happened.” He wanted to know whether, when Mueller was appointed, there was any evidence that Trump’s campaign had been colluding with the Russians. McCabe’s briefing of Mueller, along with a subsequent meeting between Mueller and Rosenstein—neither of which has been previously reported—begin to address Graham’s question. These meetings demonstrate



Robert Mueller was celebrated for his careful approach, but his caution played straight into the hands of the White House.

that, from the beginning, Mueller was instructed to conduct a narrow, fact-based criminal investigation.

McCabe was a generation younger than Mueller and still in awe of him. He had worked at the F.B.I. when Mueller was the director, and had attended countless meetings in what was then Mueller's conference room, on the seventh floor of the Hoover building. He knew that Mueller was a relentless inquisitor, and that Mueller's face, which resembles an Easter Island moai, betrayed little besides impatience. Mueller could intimidate outsiders and insiders alike with his silence. He didn't praise subordinates; he needled them, and they came to see this goading as a sign that they were still in good standing. ("Are you done playing with your food?" he would ask those who took too long with a task.) Now, improbably, Mueller was coming to McCabe for information. As the F.B.I. director, Mueller had presided from a seat at the head of the rectangular table in the con-

ference room. For that first meeting, after McCabe welcomed Mueller and his associates, Aaron Zebley and Jim Quarles, the acting F.B.I. director officiated from a seat at the middle of the table, a gesture of respect.

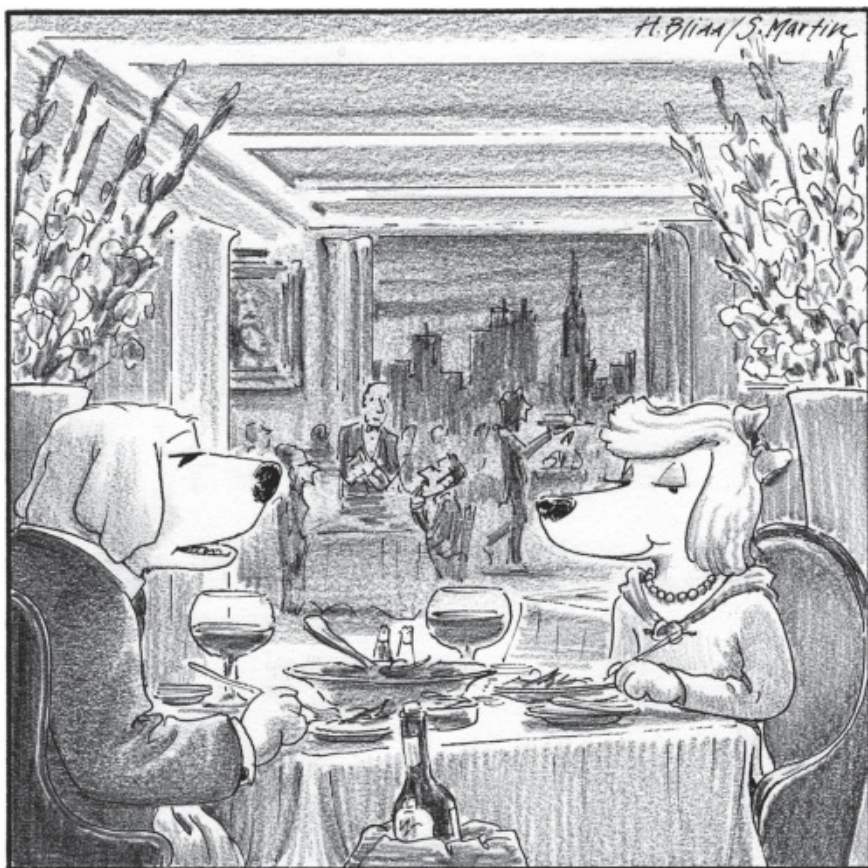
There was a long agenda, including a host of logistical matters. For one thing, Mueller's team had no place to work. The investigation would include a great deal of sensitive information, so any space would have to be secured as a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility, or SCIF. Mueller had begun to hire a staff of prosecutors, but he also needed F.B.I. agents and analysts assigned to his team. Rosenstein had not given the Office of Special Counsel a specific budget, but Mueller needed at least rough guidelines, and also support staff, to begin organizing his inquiries. (Mueller's team was eventually installed in underutilized space in Patriots Plaza, a commercial building on the southwest waterfront, near Nationals Park, where the city's major-league baseball team plays.)

The purpose of the meeting was to

describe the F.B.I.'s Russia investigation to date. "We will not get through the whole story in this one meeting," McCabe said, according to people who attended the briefing. "It's too long and complicated. We will tell you how we got here." McCabe told Mueller that Crossfire Hurricane—the code name for the Russia investigation—had begun shortly after the hack of the Democratic National Committee e-mails, which surfaced in July, 2016. The e-mails, which were released by WikiLeaks, showed that some Party officials had favored Clinton over Bernie Sanders, poisoning relations between the two candidates' supporters on the eve of the Party's convention. Around that time, the Australian government informed the F.B.I. that, in the spring of 2016, George Papadopoulos, an official from the Trump campaign, had told Alexander Downer, an Australian diplomat, that the Russians were planning to release hacked e-mails related to Clinton's campaign. After the hacking took place, McCabe explained, the Australians told the F.B.I. about the conversation. "We've known for years that the Russians were probing our political systems," McCabe said. "But July is when we say, Fuck, this is actually happening."

McCabe told Mueller that, following the hacking and the Australian disclosures, the Bureau had started looking at Trump campaign officials who had ties to the Russians. These included Carter Page, who had become involved in pro-Russian activities and had drawn the interest of the F.B.I. almost a decade earlier, and Papadopoulos. Paul Manafort, who served for a time as Trump's campaign chairman, had long-standing financial and political ties to the pro-Russian political party in Ukraine. McCabe said that the F.B.I. didn't know whether Trump was aware of the connections: "Were these people just rogue morons?"

Flynn, the former national-security adviser, who had worked on the campaign, appeared to have relatively weak ties to the Russians. Between Trump's election and his Inauguration, Flynn had spoken several times with Sergey Kislyak, the Russian Ambassador to the United States. U.S.-government surveillance revealed that the two discussed the possible easing of sanctions that the



"Then, when I got a little money, I said I'm never eating off the ground again."

Obama Administration had imposed on Russia as punishment for its interference in the 2016 election. On January 24, 2017, after Trump Administration officials, including Vice-President Mike Pence, denied that Flynn and Kislyak had discussed the sanctions, a pair of F.B.I. agents interviewed Flynn at the White House. McCabe told Mueller that Flynn had apparently lied to the agents about his conversations with Kislyak, and said that those statements should be on Mueller's agenda, too.

There was also the issue of possible obstruction of justice once Trump became President. The Comey-Trump encounters had led the F.B.I. to open a criminal investigation of the President for obstruction of justice shortly before Mueller was appointed. Trump's pointed request for Comey's "loyalty" could almost have been mistaken as the behavior of a novice. But the later meeting with Comey, when Trump asked everyone else to leave the Oval Office, was more suspicious. "It looked like Trump knew he shouldn't do it," McCabe said. "That's why he kicks everyone out."

After McCabe's briefing, Mueller, Zebley, and Quarles went to the Justice Department for an introductory meeting with Rosenstein. Rosenstein wasn't as familiar with the evidence as McCabe and his team were, but he had a broader piece of advice for Mueller. Now that he was Mueller's boss, it could be interpreted as a command. "I love Ken Starr," Rosenstein said, according to people present. (Starr was the independent counsel who oversaw the Clinton Whitewater investigation; Rosenstein had been a prosecutor on the Arkansas portion of that inquiry.) "But his investigation was a fishing expedition. Don't do that. This is a criminal investigation. Do your job, and then shut it down."

In other words, far from authorizing a wide-ranging investigation of the President and his allies, the Justice Department directed Mueller to limit his probe to individuals who were reasonably suspected of committing crimes. Temperamentally as well as professionally, Mueller was inclined to follow this advice. The very notion of a criminal investigation lasting more than eight years, as the Whitewater case had, was repellent

to him, as was Starr's seemingly desperate search to find something to pin on his target. Persistent news leaks from Starr's office and Starr's frequent sessions with reporters in the driveway of his home, in suburban Virginia, were also anathema to Mueller, who began his inquiry by imposing a comprehensive press blackout.

According to McCabe, there appeared to be possible prosecutable cases against Papadopoulos and Flynn, for false statements, and against Manafort, for financial improprieties. (In the first several months of the investigation, Mueller won guilty pleas from Papadopoulos and Flynn and secured a pair of wide-ranging indictments against Manafort, who was later convicted in one case and pleaded guilty in the other. In 2020, the Trump Administration sought to drop the case against Flynn, even though he had pleaded guilty.) Mueller decided to take on the range of issues he discussed with McCabe but little else. He also brought indictments against more than a score of Russians for attempts to interfere in the 2016 election, but they certainly would not agree to appear in an American courtroom.

Trump's political adversaries, unaware of Mueller's determination to run a brisk, narrow investigation, became invested in the expectation that he would uncover such sweeping and devastating proof of criminal misdeeds that a misbegotten Presidency would be forced to come to an end. There were "Mueller Time" T-shirts and Robert Mueller action figures—G.I. Joes for the MSNBC set. It was all the better that Mueller was a Republican and no one's idea of a political partisan. But Trump's fiercest defenders and Mueller's most devoted fans misjudged the special counsel from the beginning.

Mueller did not use the F.B.I. information as a catalyst for a deeper examination of Trump's history and personal finances. Nor did he demand to see Trump's taxes, or examine the roots of his special affinity for Putin's Russia. Most important, Mueller declined to issue a grand-jury subpoena for Trump's testimony, and excluded from his report a conclusion that Trump had committed crimes. These two de-

cisions are the most revealing, and defining, failures of Mueller's tenure as special counsel.

The President initially vowed to cooperate with the investigation, and he hired the Washington lawyer Ty Cobb to expedite the release of documents and the appearance of witnesses. Relations between Mueller's office and the Trump White House got off to a smooth start. As a condition for representing Trump, Cobb made the President promise not to attack Mueller, whom Cobb knew and respected. Throughout 2017, Trump mostly honored that pledge.

Cobb started sending documents to Mueller that summer, and interviews began in the fall. But Trump gave mixed signals about whether he would agree to testify. At a press conference in June, he was asked, "Would you be willing to speak under oath to give your version of events?" Trump answered, "One hundred per cent." On another occasion, he said, of prospective questioning by Mueller, "I'm looking forward to it, actually" and "I would do it under oath." At other times, he said he thought the weakness of the evidence against him would obviate the need for testimony: "When they have no collusion—and nobody's found any collusion at any level—it seems unlikely that you'd even have an interview." No one around Trump knew whether he wanted to testify, and he was just as evasive with his lawyers as he was in public.

By late 2017, Mueller had made it clear that he wanted to interview Trump. The President's lawyers, led at that point by John Dowd, a veteran Washington defense attorney, and Jay Sekulow, a constitutional-law expert and a conservative activist, knew that Mueller's leverage, in political if not legal terms, would only dwindle with time. Defense attorneys always try to delay, especially in politically sensitive investigations, where the attention of the news media, and of other politicians, generally moves on to other matters. Trump's lawyers stalled, demanding a list of the topics that Mueller wanted to address. Several weeks later, Mueller supplied the list. Trump's lawyers were encouraged—Mueller clearly had not discovered a trove of damning new evidence. On the list were such

subjects as Trump's knowledge of Flynn's contacts with Russians and his decision to fire Comey. The campaign was another topic: what Trump knew of a meeting, in Trump Tower in June, 2016, at which several of his campaign advisers spoke with someone they were told was a representative of the Russian government; Trump's awareness of WikiLeaks' efforts to obtain documents stolen from the Democratic National Committee; his communications with his lawyer Michael Cohen and their plans to build a Trump Tower in Moscow. Dowd was optimistic that Trump, if well prepared, could handle these issues. They even made a tentative deal with Mueller for Trump to testify, on January 27, 2018, at Camp David. But the most important issue, the scope of the questioning, was not resolved.

Trump's lawyers and Mueller's team met frequently at Mueller's headquarters, in Patriots Plaza, and, as the date of the Camp David interview approached, the negotiations grew increasingly tense. Dowd has a blustering style, and he berated Mueller about the basis for the investigation. Trump had hired Dowd in large part because the lawyer and Mueller had known each other for years. Dowd played on this familiarity.

"Cut the bullshit, Bob," Dowd said, at one meeting, according to people present. "You know you have nothing on him." Dowd was aware that, if any accusations were made, the most crucial would be obstruction of justice: "What's your theory, Bob? What law did the President violate? You're seriously going to claim that firing the F.B.I. director is a criminal act? You know he can fire the director for any damn reasons he wants." Mueller absorbed most of these sallies in silence.

Sekulow, who had often argued before the Supreme Court, was originally hired to deal only with constitutional issues for the defense team. But he gradually assumed an expanded role on Trump's behalf, usually playing the scholar to Dowd's pugilist. Sekulow opposed any direct questioning of the President, but, to avoid undercutting Dowd, he tried simply to narrow the scope of the planned interview. He told Mueller that he thought Trump might be able to answer questions about his ac-

tions during the campaign, but that anything after he was elected should be off limits, owing to executive privilege—a highly debatable assertion. Mueller greeted this, too, with silence.

Sekulow asked Mueller why he needed to interview the President at all. Mueller's prosecutors had the documents and the testimonies of others. They knew the facts—that Trump had fired Comey, that he'd tweeted insults at Jeff Sessions. What more did they need? Mueller finally replied, and his words, in a way, defined his investigation: "We need to know his state of mind." It was a narrowly legalistic response. In order to obtain a conviction for most crimes, including obstruction of justice, prosecutors must prove that the defendant had bad or corrupt intent. As Sekulow pointed out, Mueller already knew that Trump had fired

Comey. But Mueller said that he needed to know why Trump had done so.

Sekulow asked Mueller whether, in his position, he would allow Trump to testify. Sekulow was not posing a rhetorical question. He really wanted to know: What was in it for Trump to answer Mueller's questions?

Mueller was aware that few lawyers would choose to allow a client like Trump, with his propensity to lie constantly and egregiously, to answer questions in a grand-jury setting. Mueller said something about "the best interests of the country," but Sekulow had made his point, and the meeting ended soon afterward. A few days later, about two weeks before the scheduled Camp David session, Dowd called Mueller to tell him that Trump would not be sitting for an interview.

This presented Mueller with the

PEDESTRIAN CROSSING, CHARLOTTESVILLE

A gaggle of girls giggle over the bricks
leading off Court Square. We brake

dutifully, and wait; but there's at least
twenty of these knob-kneed creatures,

blond and curly, still at an age that thinks
impudence is cute. Look how they dart

and dither, changing flanks as they lurch
along—golden gobbets of infuriating foolishness

or pure joy, depending on one's disposition.
At the moment mine's sour—this is taking

far too long; don't they have minders?
Just behind my shoulder in the city park

the Southern general still stands, stonewalling us all.
When I was their age I judged Goldilocks

nothing more than a pint-size criminal
who flounced into others' lives, then

assumed their clemency. Unfair,
I know, my aggression—to lump them

into a gaggle (silly geese!) when all
they're guilty of is being young. So far.

—*Rita Dove*

question of whether he should issue a grand-jury subpoena for Trump to testify, and thus invite a battle in court. There were two key precedents in the Supreme Court rulings. In *United States v. Nixon*, in 1974, the Court unanimously ordered President Nixon to turn over White House tapes for use in the Watergate-conspiracy trial against his former aides. In *Clinton v. Jones*, from 1997, the Court ordered Bill Clinton to give a deposition in Paula Jones's sexual-harassment civil case against him.

Mueller's team later argued to Trump's lawyers that the Nixon case showed that Presidents had to cooperate with criminal investigations of the White House. Sekulow responded that a grand-jury subpoena for Trump was different. The Watergate tapes already existed; Nixon did not have to disrupt his duties to prepare his testimony. As for the Jones case, Mueller asserted that the courts regarded criminal investigations as a higher priority than civil matters. The Court had directed Clinton to give a deposition in a civil case; this was powerful evidence that the Justices would uphold a grand-jury subpoena, where the public interest was greater. Sekulow replied that the Jones case concerned only Clinton's behavior before he took office, so the questioning did not risk disclosure of matters relevant to his Presidency. Thus the Jones case had little bearing on how a court would address a grand-jury subpoena for Trump to talk about his actions as President.

Which side was right? In truth, no one knew. But if Mueller had issued the subpoena in January, 2018, there was a chance that the Supreme Court would have carried out an expedited review and issued its decision by the end of June, when the investigation would have been just a year old. Mueller may have been concerned about dragging things out, but no one could have fairly accused him of doing so had he subpoenaed Trump at that time. And Trump's testimony would certainly have been the most important piece of evidence in this investigation.

Instead, Mueller kept negotiating for an interview. Later, he wrote in his report, "We thus weighed the costs of potentially lengthy constitutional litigation, with resulting delay in finishing our investigation, against the an-

ticipated benefits for our investigation and report." But Mueller himself was responsible for much of the delay. In this critical moment, he showed weakness, and Trump pounced. After his lawyers refused the Camp David interview, he began to attack Mueller. "The Mueller probe should never have been started in that there was no collusion and there was no crime," he tweeted in March, 2018, in one of his first direct attacks on the special counsel. "WITCH HUNT!"

Trump was dissatisfied with Dowd, who he felt had misled him about how quickly he could wrap up the Mueller investigation. Seeking a lawyer who would take a harder line on his behalf, Trump hired Rudolph Giuliani, who came on in April, 2018. During the transition from Dowd to Giuliani, Sekulow asked Mueller for a pause in negotiations about Trump's possible testimony. At last, on May 5th, Trump's team requested a briefing session for Giuliani. At the meeting, Giuliani wanted to nail down a commitment from Mueller to follow a Justice Department policy, established by its Office of Legal Counsel (O.L.C.) in 1973 and reaffirmed in 2000, barring the indictment of a sitting President. Aaron Zebley, from Mueller's staff, confirmed that Mueller would honor the policy.

Giuliani said that he might agree to allow the President to answer written questions, but only about his actions



during the campaign. Everything he did as President was covered by executive privilege.

Not so, Mueller said. They went back and forth over this familiar ground.

Finally, Giuliani said, "What are you going to do? Are you going to subpoena the President?"

Mueller said, "We'll get back to you." More weeks passed.

Mueller eventually capitulated on a grand-jury subpoena and on an oral interview. Then he gave up on questions about Trump's actions as President. Finally, Trump's lawyers presented Mueller with a take-it-or-leave-it proposal: Trump would answer only written questions, and only about matters that took place before he became President. Mueller took it.

Even this process was protracted. Mueller didn't submit the written questions until September 17, 2018. Sekulow, with Jane and Martin Raskin, husband-and-wife Florida defense lawyers who had joined Trump's team, took charge of preparing the responses. This turned out to be a maddening endeavor. Before drafting answers, they had to talk to Trump to get a sense of what he knew. Trump had trouble focussing, and his anger about the Mueller investigation led him to avoid meeting with the Raskins. In fact, it was hard for any of Trump's lawyers to get on his calendar. As Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig reported in the *Washington Post*, one session came to an end when news broke that pipe bombs had been mailed to prominent Democrats and media outlets; another was interrupted by phone calls from the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Chinese President, Xi Jinping.

The Raskins fastidiously checked Trump's verbal responses against the documentary record—videos of his campaign appearances, his personal schedule, e-mails among his campaign subordinates—and the answers, nominally provided and signed by Trump, were submitted to Mueller on November 20th. Mueller and his staff had low expectations for Trump's answers; the President didn't meet them. He said twenty-two times that he failed to "recall," and twelve times that he had no "recollection."

Mueller's prosecutors did what they could at that late date: they wrote a letter. Opposing lawyers write one another a lot of letters, to "make a record" in case a dispute winds up in court. But most disputes do not end up in court, and the letters are often displays of aggression that serve only to give the lawyers, or their clients, a rush of satisfaction. From May, 2017, to December, 2018, Mueller's prosecutors

and Trump's lawyers exchanged letters about document production, about witness interviews, and about the special counsel's desire to interview the President. On December 3, 2018, Quarles, who handled much of the negotiating over the interview, addressed the inadequacy of Trump's answers. "The questions are easy to understand, call for straightforward responses and are sufficiently detailed to make clear what is being asked," he wrote. He complained that the written format gave investigators "no opportunity to ask follow-up questions that would ensure complete answers and potentially refresh your client's recollection or clarify the extent or nature of his lack of recollection."

Quarles proposed that the President grant Mueller an interview on ten areas relevant to his investigation. "They also involve matters of your client's knowledge and intent that can only be effectively explored through the opportunity for contemporaneous follow up and clarification," he wrote. The letter was either a masterpiece of passive aggression or a study in self-delusion. After all, Trump's lawyers had spent a year and a half avoiding an interview. With the intent of sounding tough, Quarles only underlined the weakness of the special counsel.

Trump's lawyers took nine days to answer, and, when they did, all four lead lawyers—Giuliani, Sekulow, and the Raskins—signed the response. The letter, three single-spaced pages long, dated December 12th, was an aria of triumphant disdain. "This White House has provided unprecedented and virtually limitless cooperation with your investigation," they wrote, adding that the President "has supplied written answers to your questions on the central subject of your mandate." They went on, "The President answered the questions despite the additional hardship caused by the confusing and substantial deficiencies of form we articulated to you in our transmittal letter. And he did so in spite of the fact that, as of eighteen months into the SCO's investigation, you had failed to specify any potential offense under investigation, let alone any theory of liability, as to which the President's provision of direct information regarding his vari-

ous 'Russia-related matters' was sufficiently important and necessary to justify the immense burden the process imposed on the President and his Office. You still have not done so."

They concluded, "When we embarked on the written question and answer procedure, we agreed to engage in a good faith assessment of any asserted need for additional questioning after you had an opportunity to consider the President's answers. Your letters have provided us no basis upon which to recommend that our client provide additional information on the Russia-related topics as to which he has already provided written answers."

Mueller's office started pulling together the report in mid-2018. It was an enormous undertaking. Each of Mueller's investigative teams had been creating informal chronologies of events, and the lawyers began integrating and cross-referencing their efforts, drawing on hundreds of F.B.I. interviews and grand-jury examinations, thousands of pages of transcripts, and millions of documents from the executive branch and from private parties. They split the report into two parts, the first about the Russia investigation, and the second about obstruction of justice in the White House.

The conclusion of Part 1 was straightforward. As the executive summary states, "Although the investigation established that the Russian government perceived it would benefit from a Trump presidency and worked to secure that outcome, and that the Campaign expected it would benefit electorally from information stolen and released through Russian efforts, the investigation did not establish that members of the Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities." This was taken, especially by Trump, as a total exoneration. "No collusion," he said countless times, which was more true than not. Trump himself had not colluded with the Russians. But Mueller's verdict was more nuanced. The report goes on to say that, "while the investigation identified numerous links between individuals with ties to the Russian government and individuals associated with the Trump Campaign,

the evidence was not sufficient to support criminal charges." Certainly, Mueller found abundant evidence that Trump and his campaign had wanted to collude and conspire with Russia, but hadn't been able to prove that they had done so. The report's verdict pointed more to insufficient evidence than to innocence.

In March, 2019, Zebley, who functioned as Mueller's deputy, called Ed O'Callaghan, who was Rod Rosenstein's deputy, to alert him to Part 2 of the report, on obstruction of justice. Rosenstein had designated O'Callaghan as his liaison with the Mueller office, and O'Callaghan had met regularly with Zebley during the investigation. The two dealt with bureaucratic issues like budgets, and Zebley gave O'Callaghan advance notice of major developments, such as when the special counsel was going to obtain indictments or guilty pleas.

"I just wanted to let you know that we are not going to reach a prosecutorial decision on obstruction," Zebley said. "We're not going to decide crime or no crime."

"Are you saying that you would have indicted Trump except for the O.L.C. opinion?" O'Callaghan asked, referring to the Justice Department policy that prohibits the indictment of a sitting President. No, Zebley said. "We're just not deciding one way or the other."

Mueller had uncovered extensive evidence that Trump had repeatedly committed the crime of obstruction of justice. To take just the most prominent examples: Trump told Comey to stop the investigation of Flynn ("Let this go"). When Comey didn't stop the Russia investigation, Trump fired him. Trump instructed his former aide Corey Lewandowski to tell Attorney General Sessions to limit the special-counsel investigation. Most important, Trump told Don McGahn, the White House counsel, to arrange for Mueller to be fired and then, months later, told McGahn to lie about the earlier order. (Both Lewandowski and McGahn declined to help engineer Comey's firing.)

The impeachment proceedings against Nixon and Clinton were rooted in charges of obstruction of justice, and Trump's offenses were even broader and

more enduring. Moreover, Mueller's staff had analyzed in detail whether each of Trump's actions met the criteria for obstruction of justice, and in the report the special counsel asserted that, in at least these four instances, it did. But Mueller still stopped short of saying that Trump had committed the crime.

Mueller's team faced a dilemma. If Mueller had brought criminal charges against Trump, the President would have had the chance to defend himself in court, but, in light of the O.L.C.'s opinion, Mueller could not charge Trump. So Mueller decided not to say whether Trump committed a crime, because he was never going to face an actual trial. The report stated, "A prosecutor's judgment that crimes were committed, but that no charges will be brought, affords no such adversarial opportunity for public name-clearing before an impartial adjudicator." In other words, in a gesture of fairness to the President, Mueller withheld a final verdict.

That still left the issue of what Mueller should say about Trump's conduct. His judgment was announced in what became the most famous paragraph of the report:

Because we determined not to make a traditional prosecutorial judgment, we did not draw ultimate conclusions about the President's conduct. The evidence we obtained about the President's actions and intent presents difficult issues that would need to be resolved if we were making a traditional prosecutorial judgment. At the same time, if we had confidence after a thorough investigation of the facts that the President clearly did not commit obstruction of justice, we would so state. Based on the facts and the applicable legal standards, we are unable to reach that judgment. Accordingly, while this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him.

Nothing in Mueller's mandate required him to reach such a confusing and inconclusive final judgment on the most important issue before him. As a prosecutor, his job was to determine whether the evidence was sufficient to bring cases. The O.L.C.'s opinion prohibited Mueller from bringing a case, but Mueller gave Trump an unnecessary gift: he did not even say whether the evidence supported a prosecution. Mueller's compromising language had another ill effect. Because it

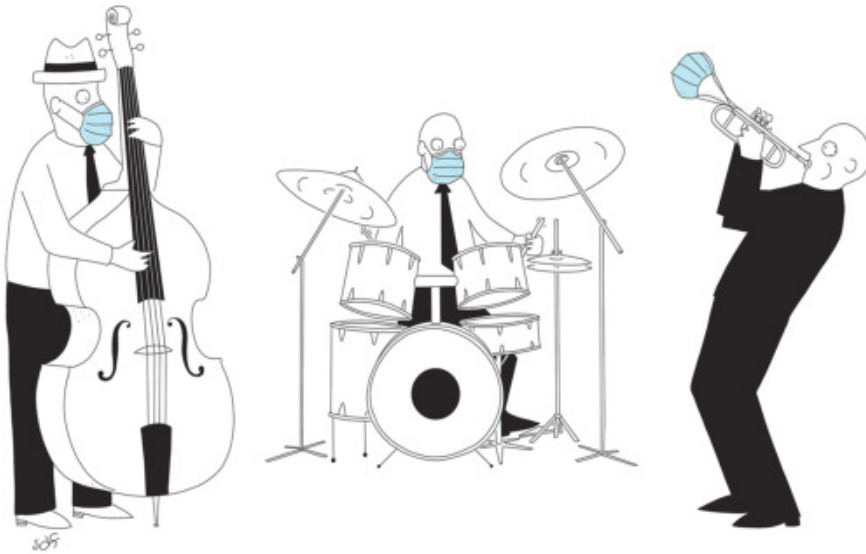
was so difficult to parse, it opened the door for the report to be misrepresented by countless partisans acting in bad faith, including the Attorney General of the United States.

When Trump took office, William Barr was sixty-six years old, and basically retired. He had served as Attorney General in 1991 and 1992, the final years of George H. W. Bush's Presidency. In this role, he supervised Mueller's work as the head of the criminal division. Barr went on to a prosperous tenure as general counsel to GTE, the telephone company that became Verizon; he left in 2008, with about twenty-eight million dollars in deferred income and separation payments. Barr then served on corporate boards, supported Catholic charities, worked part time at Kirkland & Ellis, an elite stronghold for conservative lawyers, and joined the rightward shift of the Republican Party. He and Mueller went to the same Christmas parties, and their wives attended the same Bible-study class. While Mueller was leading the F.B.I., and then the special counsel's office, Barr was mostly at home, stewing about the immoral, disorderly drift of American government and society.

For those who knew Barr, especially in recent years, a letter he wrote on June 8, 2018, did not come as a great surprise. (The letter became public six months later, soon after Barr's nomination.) It was a memorandum of more than ten thousand words, addressed to Rosenstein and Steven Engel, who led the O.L.C. Even the subject line—"Mueller's 'Obstruction' Theory"—dripped with contempt. "I am writing as a former official deeply concerned with the institutions of the Presidency and the Department of Justice," it began. "I realize that I am in the dark about many facts, but I hope my views may be useful." The gist was that much of Mueller's investigation was illegitimate. Barr said that Trump's decision to fire Comey was within his power as President. Mueller's approach to the inquiry, Barr wrote, "would have grave consequences far beyond the immediate confines of this case and would do lasting damage to the Presidency and to the administration of law within the Executive branch." Six months after Barr wrote his letter, Trump nominated him for a return engagement as Attorney General.

Once Barr was confirmed, in February, 2019, he took over formal control





of the Mueller investigation from Rosenstein. But Barr let Rosenstein continue to supervise it. The Zebley-O'Callaghan phone calls took place, in part, to set up a meeting between Barr and his staff and Mueller and his team, on March 5, 2019. The meeting was Barr's first chance to assess the Mueller investigation before the report was released. It was a fairly relaxed session. Mueller gave a brief introduction. (Later, Barr's team noted that Mueller looked tired and old. Because Mueller had been the focus of so much public attention for nearly two years and said so little in public, he had taken on an almost mythic status, even among people who once knew him well, like Barr. To see him after this exhausting enterprise was startling. He was an old seventy-four.)

Zebley summarized Part 1 of the report, explaining that the special counsel had found insufficient evidence to charge anyone affiliated with the Trump campaign with a substantive crime relating to Russia. Quarles handled Part 2. There would be no conclusion about whether Trump had committed a crime. Barr was puzzled. No recommendation? That's right, Quarles said. It wasn't that Mueller was unable to reach a conclusion about whether Trump had committed a crime but that, under the circumstances, he had chosen not to do so.

As the meeting was breaking up, Barr asked about the public release of

the report. During his confirmation hearings, Barr had promised to release it. The question was how, and when. The lengthy report would have to be reviewed for grand-jury material and other matters that should not be made public. What should Barr release immediately after receiving the report? The Mueller team had prepared a one-page introduction and a roughly ten-page summary of each part, and Mueller told Barr that it would be appropriate to release those sections immediately. Barr said he would think it over. Based on exchanges during the next two weeks, the Mueller team expected Barr to release the summaries as soon as he received the report.

Around noon on Friday, March 22nd, a courier delivered a single copy of the four-hundred-and-forty-eight-page report to O'Callaghan, at the Department of Justice. Rosenstein and O'Callaghan alerted Barr to its arrival, and Barr advised Congress that the report had been delivered. He also informed Pat Cipollone, the White House counsel. Trump's lawyers, scattered around the country, rushed to Washington so that they could prepare their response. Rosenstein's staff spent all Friday reading and digesting the report. On Saturday, they prepared a draft of a letter that Barr would release the next day.

On Sunday, March 24th, around noon, O'Callaghan called Zebley to say

that Barr was going to release a letter about the report that afternoon, and he asked whether Mueller's team wanted to review it first. Zebley had thought Barr would release Mueller's summaries, not a gloss by Barr on the report. After conferring with Mueller and others on the team, Zebley told O'Callaghan that Mueller didn't want to see Barr's letter—he wasn't going to vouch for it. This decision may have made sense at the time, but in retrospect it was a strategic error, depriving Mueller of the opportunity to dissociate himself in advance if the letter turned out to be misleading.

Barr released his letter at about three-thirty that afternoon. In it, he said that he was addressing the "principal conclusions" of Mueller's report. But the letter, though not technically inaccurate, spun the special counsel's findings about Russia in a way that was favorable to Trump. As for obstruction of justice, Barr explained that Mueller had "determined not to make a traditional prosecutorial judgment. Instead, for each of the relevant actions investigated, the report sets out evidence on both sides of the question and leaves unresolved what the Special Counsel views as 'difficult issues' of law and fact concerning whether the President's actions and intent could be viewed as obstruction. The Special Counsel states that, 'while this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him.'"

This, too, was accurate. Barr went on, "Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein and I have concluded that the evidence developed during the Special Counsel's investigation is not sufficient to establish that the President committed an obstruction-of-justice offense." In other words, Mueller hadn't reached a conclusion on whether Trump committed a crime, but Barr had. In just two days, without speaking to the authors of the report about their evidence or their conclusions, Barr and Rosenstein asserted that they had digested hundreds of pages of dense findings and decided that the President had not committed a crime. The letter was an obvious act of sabotage against Mueller and an extraordinary gift to the President. By leaving the

disclosure of the report and its conclusions entirely up to Barr, Mueller had brought this disaster on himself and his staff.

Trump was at Mar-a-Lago for the weekend, and he spoke to reporters on the tarmac on Sunday afternoon, before returning to Washington. Trump declared that the Mueller report was a “complete and total exoneration.” He said, “It’s a shame that our country had to go through this. To be honest, it’s a shame that your President has had to go through this.” Back in Washington, Trump’s lawyers gathered in the Yellow Oval Room to toast their success. They had planned for months to release a “prebuttal” of the report, but Barr had done it for them. Trump arrived in the early evening and thanked everyone. He had been saying it for months—no collusion, no obstruction—and the Attorney General confirmed it.

The following morning, O’Callaghan called Zebley to check in. Zebley explained that Barr’s letter had said that the Mueller report had related facts “without reaching any legal conclusions”—a claim that wasn’t true. The report had, in fact, concluded that the special counsel couldn’t rule out that Trump had committed a crime. Zebley asked whether O’Callaghan was still planning on releasing Mueller’s executive summaries. O’Callaghan said that he’d look into it. Later that day, Zebley sent O’Callaghan the executive summaries with all grand-jury material redacted, so that they could be released immediately. O’Callaghan did not respond.

Many people on Mueller’s staff were furious with Barr, who had undermined two years of work by mischaracterizing it for Trump’s benefit. And, with the report still secret, no response could be made. Mueller was aggrieved in his customarily reticent, rule-following fashion. On Wednesday, March 27th, he wrote a private letter of modest protest to Barr:

The introductions and executive summaries of our two-volume report accurately summarize this Office’s work and conclusions. The summary letter the Department sent to Congress and released to the public late in the afternoon of March 24 did not fully capture the

context, nature, and substance of this Office’s work and conclusions. We communicated that concern to the Department on the morning of March 25. There is now public confusion about critical aspects of the results of our investigation. This threatens to undermine a central purpose for which the Department appointed the Special Counsel: to assure full public confidence in the outcome of the investigations.

Even with its restrained language, the letter would have caused a sensation if Mueller had leaked it, but it did not become public for more than a month. Barr called Mueller on Thursday, March 28th, acting like the injured party. “What was up with that letter, Bob?” he said. “Why didn’t you just pick up the phone?” Mueller said that his staff had worked hard on the summaries, and expected that they were going to be released. Mueller suggested that Barr issue the summaries right away. “We don’t want to do it piecemeal,” Barr replied. “We just want to get the whole report out.” The ability to release some or all of the report was in the hands of the Department of Justice, not the special counsel.

At the end of the week, Barr revealed that he would conduct a review of the full report for information that was related to a grand jury or otherwise sensitive, and then release it with those bits redacted. There would be no release of the summaries. The review of the report proceeded at a stately pace. As days, then weeks, passed, the conventional wisdom hardened: Mueller had found nothing.

On April 18th, Barr announced at a news conference that he was releasing

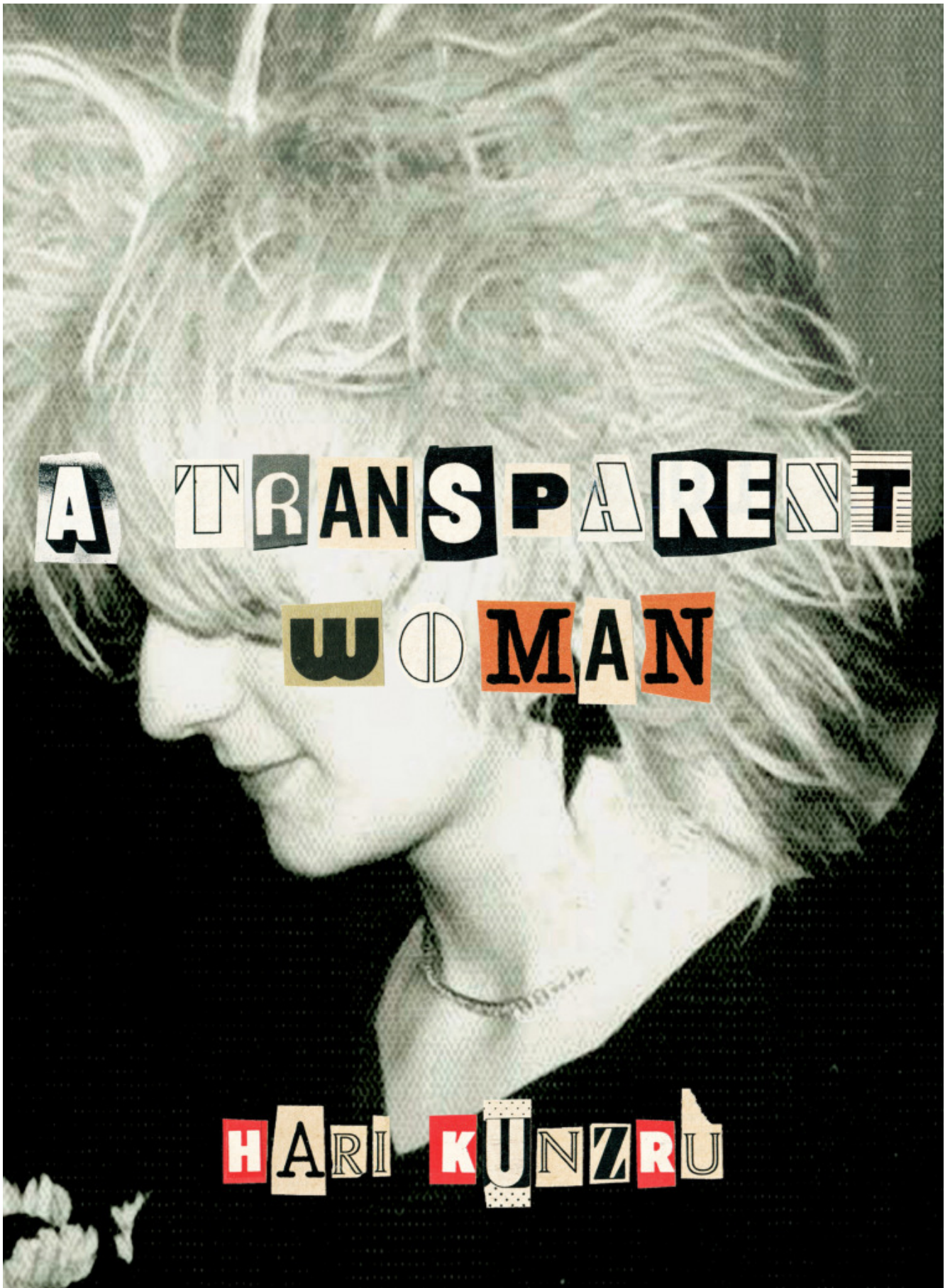


the Mueller report. What the Attorney General said next received little attention, because journalists immediately began diving into the report and revealing its contents. (Rosenstein’s frozen stare, while he was standing behind Barr, drew more notice.) “It is important to bear in mind the context,” Barr said. “President Trump faced an

unprecedented situation. As he entered into office, and sought to perform his responsibilities as President, federal agents and prosecutors were scrutinizing his conduct before and after taking office, and the conduct of some of his associates. At the same time, there was relentless speculation in the news media about the President’s personal culpability.” Barr went on, “There is substantial evidence to show that the President was frustrated and angered by his sincere belief that the investigation was undermining his Presidency, propelled by his political opponents, and fueled by illegal leaks.” Finally, Barr said, “The President took no act that in fact deprived the special counsel of the documents and witnesses necessary to complete his investigation. Apart from whether the acts were obstructive, this evidence of non-corrupt motives weighs heavily against any allegation that the President had a corrupt intent to obstruct the investigation.”

Barr neglected to mention, in these fawning remarks, that the Mueller investigation had taken place because the Russian government had engaged in a systematic attempt to help Trump win the election—an attempt that the candidate and his staff encouraged. It was true that Trump believed the investigation was undermining him, but self-pity does not represent a defense of his efforts to interfere with the investigation. And the only reason that Trump took “no act” to interfere with the investigation was that his subordinates, including Don McGahn and Corey Lewandowski, refused to follow his directives to do so.

Barr continued to diminish Mueller’s report and to dilute its impact. Trump finally had an Attorney General who put the President’s personal and political well-being ahead of the national interest, the traditions of the Justice Department, and the rule of law. But Barr was able to dismantle the Mueller report only because the special counsel and his staff had made it easy for him to do so. Robert Mueller forfeited the opportunity to speak clearly and directly about Trump’s crimes, and Barr filled the silence with his high-volume exoneration. Mueller’s investigation was no witch hunt; his report was, ultimately, a surrender. ♦



Her family was happy about it. It was a big deal to get one of the new places. The entire district was a building site, a showcase for the socialist future. She reckoned she had about five more years before she turned into one of the horrible sows who gave her the evil eye from behind their net curtains when she walked past with her friends. Five years of life. At weekends she'd take the train to Alexanderplatz and hang around with other teen-agers. Sooner or later they were always chased away by the police.

She never got on at school and left to become an apprentice at a textile factory in a town just outside Berlin, which improved things because she could move out of the family home and live in a hostel. It was O.K. at first, but the boredom was like acid. She had a bad temper, and sometimes got into fights. One day some old piss-schnapps-cabbage man at the factory called her into an office and gave her an official warning. She already had a mark against her because she didn't want to join the Free German Youth.

Every weekend she would take the train back to the city. The first time she saw punks, it was amazing, like being electrocuted, jolted out of her dead skin. A couple sitting in a square in Friedrichshain, like two peacocks. The boy had a leather jacket, and his hair was spiked up. The girl wore a dog collar, and her head was shaved so that only a sort of lock or tuft hung down at the front. They just didn't give a shit.

She didn't have to think twice. She hacked off her hair, dyed the tufts with watercolors, and spiked them up with soap. Then she went back to look for the punks. Why not? She had nothing else going on. Even then it wasn't as if she were really doing anything. Taking the train, drinking, wandering around, drinking more, hoping for something to happen. But that was all anyone was doing. It was what there was to do. Soon she knew most of the crew, at least by sight. The peacock couple, everyone. The boys from Köpenick, the idiot with the army greatcoat who stabbed his own leg on a dare. It wasn't such a big scene. Bored kids. She went to a party where a band played in the attic of someone's house. Fifty of them in there, throwing themselves around,

drinking and dancing and smoking cigarettes. It was the greatest evening of her life.

All they wanted was to jump around. It wasn't a big deal, but it sent the piss-schnapps-cabbage men crazy. They thought the punks were agents of the C.I.A. Poison from the West, a threat to good order. Not that you could get any of the real punk clothes unless you knew someone who could cross over. You had to improvise, make studs and patches and buttons out of whatever was available. You sat on park benches in your homemade outfits. You couldn't stay put for ten minutes without the cops coming.

At the factory she got another talking to, and they told her someone else needed her place at the hostel. It was a punishment, of course—they didn't really bother hiding it. What could she do? Better to lie down on the tracks than go back to live with her doormat of a mother and her piss-schnapps-cabbage dad. There seemed to be no third option, so she went into the city and got fucked up on paint thinner and tried to shake her head off her shoulders, pogoing in a courtyard behind a church in Prenzlauer Berg as a band thrashed cheap guitars and a singer rhymed "shit and boredom have no borders" with "everyone is taking orders." Two cool girls were dancing next to her, jerking their heads and punching the air. When some limp dick tried to hit on one of them, Monika gave him a shove, sent him sprawling.

We need a drummer, the girl with the bleached crop said. Monika told her she couldn't play drums. That's O.K., she said. It doesn't matter. And just like that a third option opened up. The girls, Katja and Elli, were living in a place on Linienstrasse, with a rotating cast of boyfriends to carry furniture and fix things. It was a tenement that had been declared unfit for habitation—on one side there was nothing but rubble, on the other a building whose frontage had collapsed, a sort of skeleton that no one had got around to demolishing—but several of the apartments were occupied by young people who didn't have a hope of getting on the list for official housing. That was where they took her to jam, in this building whose façade was pocked with thousands of wartime

bullet holes, and it was sort of understood, without her needing to ask, that she was going to move in. The equipment was set up in their living room. The guitar and vocal plugged into a single amp. She bashed away at someone's borrowed kit. She didn't know what to do, so at first she did everything at the same time, hit with the sticks and stamped on the pedal, making a big lumbering primitive noise. She would get better, but not much.

Then it was the three of them. Katja sang, and Elli played guitar. Monika had never met anyone like them, girls from art school who spent their days making things, as if it were a job. They weren't ashamed of being different. They laughed at the idea that they could ever end up as net-curtain twitchers, disgusting baby factories doing the ironing while some man drank himself stupid in front of the TV. Katja declaimed her crazy poetry into the microphone, all this gothic stuff about blood and graves and ravens, while Elli threw poses and windmilled her arm as she slammed down on the strings.

Elli was shy, except when she played guitar. Katja was a social force. She seemed to have an almost supernatural ability to make things happen. Whatever you needed, whatever plot you'd just hatched in the bar, she would be there with an idea, a connection. It would turn out she'd seen exactly the thing you needed, discarded in the street, or had bumped into someone from the old days—Katja had old days, it was one of the sophisticated things about her—a guy who liked her and could be persuaded to help. One day she breezed in and told them she'd got the band a gig. She said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but to Monika the prospect was terrifying. Getting up in front of people, making a spectacle of herself.

In the G.D.R., you needed permission from the authorities to play music in front of an audience. You had to audition for a committee. The official pop musicians were all balding men who'd done their military service and trained at the conservatory. Of course no one was ever going to give the green light to some dirty punk girls, so they had no option, really. The gig was a secret,

or as much of a secret as something like that can be.

So there were official bands and unofficial bands, but few as unofficial as Die Gläsernen Frauen. They'd needed a name, and naturally Katja had one. The Transparent Women. There had once been a transparent woman and a transparent man, anatomical models made out of some kind of see-through plastic, technological marvels of the nineteen-twenties that children were taken to see on school trips to the German Hygiene Museum, in Dresden. It was a good name, Monika thought, a defiant name.

The concert wasn't much. A couple of dozen people in a dusty room, the cellar of a building where some friend of Katja's worked or lived, Monika wasn't exactly sure. They borrowed another amp and found a drum kit that was a little better than the first, though one of the heads was patched with tape, and the cymbals were the kind with leather straps, made to be used in an orchestra or carried in a marching band. The kit's owner had hung them awkwardly from a pair of homemade stands. There wasn't a stage; they just walked out into silence, some scattered clapping. And then they attacked. One two three four, into their first number, which was just Katja shouting "Stupid bear! Stupid bear!" while Elli played some chords she'd copied from a Ramones song. Everyone was surprised, of course—three girls playing music—but soon people were dancing. Katja and Elli's art-school friends, the kids from the park. A few apprentices from the meatpacking plant hung at the edges while the punks fought in the mosh pit. Monika battered her kit and it sounded like dead bodies hitting the ground and the guitar and the vocal fed back so that the whole thing was just a mess of distortion, you couldn't say what it was, or if it was music exactly, but it had something. Energy. Life.

Of course the factory hadn't lasted, but Monika needed to do something; it was illegal not to have a job, and after a lot of hassle she found one in the neighborhood, at a workshop where they electroplated bathroom fix-

tures. One evening, as she was sweeping up, her last task before leaving, a man in a roll-neck sweater let himself in and stood watching her. He had that look. They all had it, that unclear cleanliness.

He offered her a cigarette. He was older than her, but not by much. In some places, he would have been considered handsome. What are you doing here? he said. This place is not for you.

Like a lover, a leading man in a movie. It was absurd. What did he want? Nothing bad. He wanted her to be able to stretch her creative wings. He did a little drumming mime. He swept his hair back from his face and lit a cigarette, doing some kind of cool-cat business with his lighter. He said he had a car outside,

could he give her a ride home? No? Well, then, he could take her out instead. He would buy her a drink, hear about her big dreams. She was a girl with big dreams, he could tell.

She wanted nothing to do with him. Everything about him was wrong. Go away, she said, but he wouldn't stop talking. Finally she waved the broom, made as if she were going to hit him with it. He laughed. O.K., O.K., holding up his hands. He didn't take her seriously at all. I left you something, he said. In your locker.

When she was sure he'd gone, she checked. Her lock was still attached, but inside was something she hadn't put there. A record. It was an LP by an all-girl band from London. She knew them. She had a tape—maybe Elli had copied it from one of her friends—with a couple of their songs on it. They were good, but this album had a sort of soft-porn cover, the three band members topless and covered in mud, like sexy savages. It was supposed to be shocking. As a present from that guy, it was just sleazy. He knew so much about her taste and at the same time he'd found a way to leer at her. She thought about throwing the record away, but despite the shitty cover the band was good, and if she decided not to keep it she could swap it for something, so she put it in her bag and took it home.

He left it two weeks. Long enough for her to think he'd got the message. He made her jump, of course. He was

that type. You could go to music school, he said, leaning out of a car window. Another man was driving, matching her pace as she walked home from work. You could get some time in a recording studio, whatever you want. She could do this, she should do that. She told him to stick his studio up his ass, and he made a sad-clown face. Honey, don't be like that. You ought to be sweet to me. You wouldn't want anything to go wrong in your life. You wouldn't want there to be any misunderstandings.

He gave her a time, an address, held out a piece of paper with the details. When she wouldn't take it, he finally got out of the car and came after her. He blocked her path and stuffed the paper into the front pocket of her jeans, pulling her close to him and grinding his knuckles against her belly. She would be there or else he would "spank her bottom." Hearty chuckles as the car pulled away. When she got into work the next day, there were three more records in her locker. She left them where they were. She didn't even want to touch them.

She didn't go to the meeting. She had what she thought of as a perfect excuse. The band was heading out on the road. Ten days of Katja singing "Better off dead than getting kicked in the head," Katja singing "Only if I'm dreaming can I say I'm free." Leipzig, Dresden, Halle. Barns and cellars and old factories. In each place there were young people, floors and couches to crash on, hands to pass a bottle or a cigarette. So, yes, she felt hopeful. There were people like her. That didn't mean their lives were "nice." Or "liberating." Mostly they were tired and scared. They were making do, getting wasted on whatever was to hand. There was always a bad atmosphere when D.G.F. played, an edge of violence. When they were onstage in Dresden, someone threw a glass bottle at Elli, which hit her on the side of the head. She staggered, then went down on her hands and knees. Monika stopped playing, thinking she was badly hurt, but she was only trying to find the bottle to throw back.

When they got home to Berlin, Monika knew there'd be a reckoning, but she didn't think it would be so quick or so brutal. When she went to work, her boss, a nice old man who'd never seemed to mind how she looked or where she spent



her leisure time, told her that he was sorry but he couldn't keep someone like her around anymore. She didn't have to ask what he meant. Could she clear out her locker? Yes, he did mean right away. The records were still in there. She didn't know what to do with them, so she stuffed them into a borrowed shopping bag along with the rest of the locker's contents—her lunch box, her spare clothes. And of course when she walked out onto the street the man in the roll-neck sweater was waiting with his smirking friend. Two junior piss-schnapps-cabbage men, leaning on their piss-schnapps-cabbage car. She tried to give him back the records. He'd had his fun, now he could leave her alone. This time he didn't pretend to find her cute. Silly bitch, did she think she could just mess him around? He told her to get in the car. It was time she understood a few things.

They drove for a short while and pulled into a courtyard, next to a delivery truck with a picture of fruit and vegetables on the side. A man in blue overalls was leaning on the hood. As they drew up, he ground out a cigarette with his boot. They took her from the car and told her to get in the back of the truck. She hesitated, and they were rough as they pushed her inside. She had a moment to see that the interior was divided into little windowless compartments, before she was shoved into one and the door locked behind her. She was left in complete darkness, sitting on some kind of stool. The engine started, and she groped around to see if there was a bar or a handle, something to hold on to.

These things are easy enough to read about. Transported in total darkness, brought out into a punishingly bright place, banks of neon strip lights trained down on a garage with reflective white walls. The transition from darkness to dazzling light, a shock designed to induce a physical crisis, to reduce the subject to a state of abjection, nothing but a half-blind animal, stunned and panicking.

They were quick but thorough, photographing her, taking fingerprints. The interrogation room was furnished in the style of any other government office. A pair of wood-veneer desks were arranged in a T-shape. At the window hung a dirty lace curtain. The lace curtain was funny, she supposed. The roll-

neck man probably had a sow wife at home twitching one just like it as she spied on the neighbors.

It was the first time she'd seen him in uniform. He looked primmer than he did when he was roaming around the city in civilian clothes. He had placed his hat neatly on the desk, next to a pale-pink file. He didn't look up as the guards brought her in, just pretended to read. Sit, he said, waving vaguely at a chair at the foot of the T. He pushed back a strand of his thick black hair, smoothed and patted it with a flattened palm. No, on your hands. Still he didn't look up. She was confused, and he raised his voice. Put your hands under your buttocks, palms down. Sit on your hands. She did as she was told. He opened up a file and made some kind of note.

In front of him he had a telephone, a tape recorder, and a box with a row of buttons whose function was not obvious. In front of her was a microphone. Things were going to change, he said. From now on there would be no time for romantic games. She asked if she was under arrest. No, what made her

think that? They were just going to have a little chat.

The threat hidden in that twee bloodless phrase.

He pressed a button on the tape recorder and began. Factual questions. Names and places, information about the band, people she had met in other cities. I don't know, she kept saying. I can't remember. In that moment, she was telling the truth. She really couldn't remember anything. It was something she was good at, practiced in. Partial self-erasure. She could live for long periods as if her memories were not hers, as if they were just images taken from films or books.

He oscillated between unctuous compassion and petulant threats. Had she given a single moment's thought to her family, her friends? Take it from him, the consequences of these things were never limited to one person. She should imagine, he said, that she was throwing a stone into a pond. The ripples would spread out. Luckily for her he had a solution. To what, she wondered, other than the trouble that he



"False alarm—the King is just sleeping. Long sleep the King!"

himself was causing? His solution was this: Together they would write out an agreement. She would confirm her loyalty to the German Democratic Republic and agree to work with the Ministry for State Security. A small thing. Most people would see it as their patriotic duty.

She didn't want to provoke him—she had no sense of the limits of his power, what he could realistically do to her—but, as he whined on, a bolus of disgust rose in her throat. All of it, the fake delivery truck, the cell, the blinding lights, just so a repressed little man could issue threats and shuffle papers at his desk. She had to concentrate to fight her nausea, and because speaking made it worse she didn't speak, didn't say the things he wanted her to say. Again and again she swallowed the words and shook her head and eventually he seemed to run out of steam. With one more twist he could probably have broken her, but he didn't see it. Instead he pressed his call button and ordered the guards to take her to her cell.

As she sat and waited for whatever would happen next, she tried to divert her mind from the more frightening possibilities, but there was nothing else to dwell on, no way to distract herself. If it got really bad, could she escape? The light fixture would hold her weight. She still had the laces in her shoes. Then she heard the sound of keys and the door's heavy bolt being drawn. Roll-neck came in, and ordered her to stand. She caught the sour hormonal stink of her own sweat. He could smell it, too. His face was a mask of disgust.

I'm going to throw you back, he said, in a tone of professional regret. She thought she had misheard. Throw her back, like a fish. He stepped aside, making an irritated gesture at the open cell door. Could he offer one word of advice before she left? She ought to go straight home. She wouldn't want people to start wondering where she'd been. That weaselly hint of concern. As if the two of them were complicit in something, a scheme or a love affair.

She was given back the borrowed shopping bag, still filled with the contents of her work locker, and escorted to the front gate. The gate closed behind her, and she found herself on a

residential street, facing a row of maisonettes. Behind her was a high wall and a watchtower. She didn't have a way of telling the time, but from the light she guessed that it was late afternoon.

She chose a direction that seemed likely to lead to a main road, and began walking. Eventually she found a U-Bahn station, and arrived home at more or less the normal time, as if she'd just finished her day at the workshop. When she came through the door, Elli was sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette. Everything O.K.? she asked distractedly, then squinted at Monika's bag. You have records, she said, brightening up. What did you get? At first Monika didn't understand. Then she felt sick. She'd forgotten about Roll-neck's "gifts." Without thinking, she had brought a piece of him home. Mechanically, she dug the records out of the bag and handed them over. Seeing Elli reading the sleeves made her feel guilty, as if she were exposing her to a contagious disease. Her friend's amazed, slightly envious expression told her that she'd made a problem for herself. The records were too good, too recently released to come without an explanation. I swapped them with Peter, she said, the first thing that came into her head, and then cursed herself because this Peter was a close friend, in and out of the apartment all the time. The lie could easily be found out. She had a sudden sense of threat, the springing of the trap set by Roll-



neck as she left the cell. Go straight home. You wouldn't want people to start wondering where you've been. Why should she lie? What was the point? Because he'd put the idea into her head? But then again how was she to tell the story without inviting suspicion? Every question would breed more questions. Why hadn't she ever said anything before about talking to the Stasi? Were the records payment for some kind of service? She was exhausted and very

hungry. She just wanted to forget about everything for a few hours. After she'd had some sleep, she would handle it. She ran into the bathroom, stripped off her clothes, and stood shivering under the thin trickle of the shower.

Her plan was to tell Katja first. She wanted to do it when the two of them were alone, but somehow she never found the right moment. There were always people in the apartment, or they were all out somewhere, watching a band or with a big group at a bar. As the days went by, a sort of skin or scab grew over the memory of her arrest. Why pick away at it? Little by little she fell into a kind of magical thinking, as if the reality of what had happened to her depended on its being told, put into words. Instead she swallowed it, forced it down into the pit of her stomach and barred its way back out with the gate of her teeth.

Elli had a boyfriend, whose name was Kurt. Another musician, a bass player. One morning Monika was lying in bed when Kurt put his head round her door. Had she seen his notebook? He'd left it on the kitchen table. She propped herself up on her elbows and said no, she hadn't, and just at that moment she spotted it, or, rather, they both spotted it simultaneously, lying on top of the beer crate where she kept her clothes. There was no reason for it to be there. They had all been at a party. She'd come in and gone straight to bed, just fallen in drunkenly without even turning on the light.

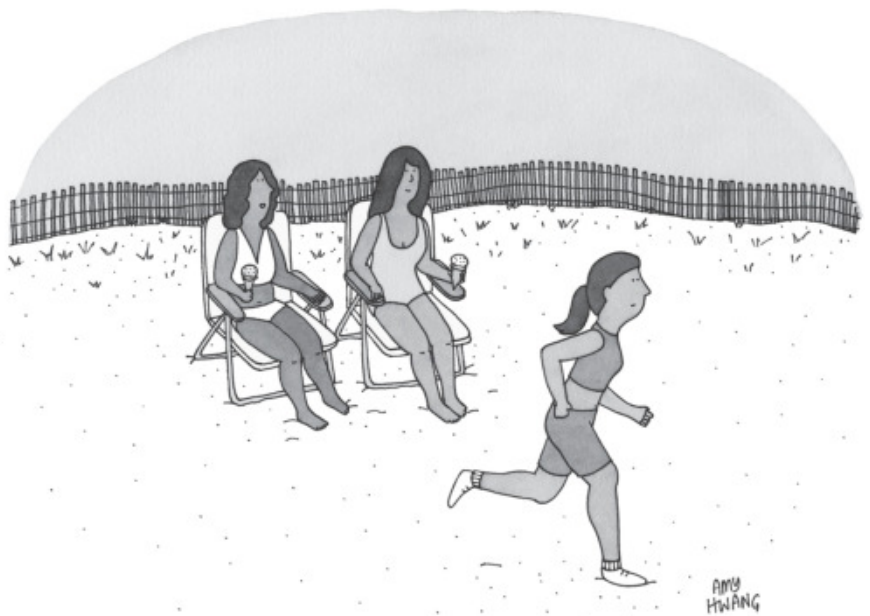
Kurt was more quizzical than angry. If you want to read my secret thoughts, he said, you could just ask. But the notebook was only the beginning. Over the next few weeks, all sorts of personal things went missing or were moved around in the apartment. Someone took a hundred marks from the pocket of Elli's leather jacket. Katja's photos were left out on her bed. No one came out and made accusations, but these small crimes and clumsy invasions of privacy put everyone on edge. Who would leave a used sanitary towel by her bed? Or tear pages out of Elli's books? A bad atmosphere developed. Katja and Elli became conspiratorial, exclusive. Sometimes Monika thought she was going mad. Was she actually responsible, doing all these things without knowing?

Then came the fight at the church. Even the old Chekists of the secret police only dared to go so far against the Lutherans, and some pastors took advantage of this latitude to do political things, such as letting punk bands play in their halls. The pastor of a church in Friedrichshain was a bearded young man who painted abstractions and believed in turning swords into plowshares.

On the night of the concert, there was a good atmosphere, at least at the beginning. Another band played before D.G.F., and the crowd was excited, whooping and cheering as it waited for them to come on. A few people had even crossed over from West Berlin for the show. Katja introduced her to an English guy who was dressed, for some reason, in a Weimar-era postman's uniform. He'd brought some tapes of underground industrial music as a present. He said he wanted to take the three of them into a studio. Though he was obviously trying to score with Katja, the offer seemed to be genuine.

The church hall had a proper stage, and they were standing in the wings, waiting to go on, when some skinheads arrived. Not a few. Twenty or thirty. It was 88 Tommy's birthday, and they'd all been drinking. Everyone knew 88 Tommy and his idiot friends, but tonight there were more of them, a lot of faces she didn't recognize. D.G.F. went into their first song, and right away the skins pushed their way to the front. They started spitting and making obscene gestures. From farther back, someone threw a bottle. Monika was protected behind the kit, but at the front it was bad. Katja was jabbing at shirtless men with her mike stand, warning them to keep back. During the second song a couple of guys started *Sieg heil*-ing and one of them got onstage and pushed Elli down into the crowd and after that it was chaos. As if at a signal, the stage was full of skinheads throwing punches, kicking over the P.A., beating people with mike stands. Monika cowered behind her kit, unable to see what had happened to her friends. When she spotted an opening between the scuffling bodies, she ran for a side door.

Almost as soon as she got outside, she was grabbed by two men in bureaucratic raincoats who smelled of cigarettes. They hustled her in the direc-



"She may have an incredible body, but we have incredible ice cream."

tion of a waiting car, talking loudly about how they were "here to protect" her and "get her to safety." The street was full of people who had come outside to get away from the fight. The men made such a noise, raising their voices. They drew everybody's attention.

Pastor Daniel was in the crowd, holding a handkerchief against a wound on his forehead. He frowned as he saw her go past. She tried to shake the men off, but one of them poked her in the small of her back with a fist or a stick, a quick discreet attack that caused a flash of intense pain. While she was incapacitated, they more or less picked her up and threw her into the back seat of a car.

They drove her to a hairdresser, of all places, nearby in Lichtenberg. The lights were on in the shop even though it was almost midnight. She could do with a makeover, said one, laughing. Mousy little thing like her ought to do something with herself. She should take a little more pride in her appearance. They led her to the back of the shop where, of course, the roll-neck man was waiting, natty in driving gloves and a new brown leather jacket. Have a seat, he said. Don't worry, you're safe now.

She could have defied him. She could have said, Pig, when did I ever ask you

to keep me safe? She could have said, I know you don't give a damn about me, so cut the shit and tell me what this is really about. Instead she flopped down onto a chair and almost in a whimper, the whimper of a frightened little girl, a beaten dog, she asked why he had to make it so obvious to her friends. And as she heard herself she understood what he'd done, how completely he'd won. He'd made his abuse into a shared secret, a cozy secret that had alienated her from her friends, and she was disgusted with him, and with herself for falling for it, and with the sordid world that made such a thing possible.

He was using his indoor voice, his forked tongue. He told her he admired her loyalty to her friends, however misguided. He made offers. Perhaps she needed money? He might be able to organize a stipend. She told him to do whatever he wanted. She'd had enough. He pretended to be offended. He had, he said, a sworn duty to uphold the law. He took that seriously. Did she not take that seriously? Surely, after such a disgusting display of violence, it would be obvious even to someone as obtuse as her that negative decadent elements were at work in her little milieu.

She threw up her hands. So why the

hell had he arrested her, instead of them? He claimed not to understand. Them? The skinheads. The ones who did the violence. She couldn't believe how little he seemed to understand. Skinheads? Did he really not know what they were? He asked her to describe them. Ah, yes, he said. Ah, yes. So did these animals have names?

Tommy.

He smiled and took a pad out of his pocket. Tommy. Very good. So what else did she know about this Tommy? A surname, perhaps? Where did he live? And then she saw what he was doing, getting her to give him information, to report to him, and she had a feeling like looking into a pit. No, she said. Just that. No. He pretended to be surprised. Wasn't this Tommy one of the real criminals, the ones she thought he ought to be focussing on? Well, then, surely she should be happy to assist. I'm not working with you, she told him. I'm not one of your creatures.

There was a rustle of plastic curtain beads. She swivelled on the chair and there he was, as if she'd magicked him into being. 88 Tommy the skin, his white T-shirt with a few spots of red near the collar. He grinned a doughy grin. He looked drunk. She was so confused that she just sat there with her mouth open. She could not put it all together. Roll-neck's smirk. Tommy's presence. His easy, casual air, leaning in the doorway, scuffing the sole of his boot against the floor.

Roll-neck let her take it all in for a minute. We have many people helping us, he said. In all sectors of society. So, it was late. Perhaps he ought to let Tommy drop her off? Someone should see her to her door.

You could come and meet the boys, Tommy said. Roll-neck thought that line was hilarious. Meet them? All of them? No, no, Tommy, she wouldn't like it. He grinned at her. Maybe, Roll-neck said, they should play a game. If she agreed to work for him he'd give her a head start. She didn't understand. He gestured to Tommy, and then to the door. Say yes and she would have five minutes before he unleashed the beast. Tommy looked angry at being called a beast, but he didn't say anything. An expression crossed his face, a brief collapse of his drunken smirk. Maybe, she thought, Roll-neck had

SHANGHAI

I fell in love many times these months
with certain evenings,
the city awash in green Neptune light.
When I was low, I was low.
And the city welcomed it, wrestled
a steady heat from my melancholy.
To be *shanghaied* once meant
to be kidnapped against your will
during a shortage of sailors.
Some were forced to sign with guns to their temples.
Others, beat unconscious, woke
to the wide roaring sea, ready to serve.
It was violent. Today, the bright plazas
speed us into manic dream,
the kind where you know
your executioner is coming
and we all get high
on the fluorescence and doom.
This is a place where I've let people down.
But the penance is different.
Not like New York with her sad gargoyles.
Instead, Shanghai has her young, surveilling moonlight.
Outside, a wild and holy river runs full of tanks
and neon boats peppered below a bulbous skyline.

something on him, too. She stood up, without speaking. Then she turned and walked to the door.

Once outside, she started running, convinced that Tommy was coming after her, but after a few blocks and a few turns she realized she was alone, and allowed herself to slow down. Eventually she had to stop and rest, propping her hands on her knees, coughing and spitting into the gutter.

When she got home she found the apartment full of people. The atmosphere was unfriendly. They squinted at her through a haze of cigarette smoke. So who were her friends? She tried to explain as best as she could. Yes, they were cops. Of course they were. They'd been harassing her. She'd never given them a thing. She'd found out that they were working with Tommy. That part of it people seemed to believe. Tommy with the pigs. But why hadn't she said anything before? She told them all to fuck themselves and shut herself in her room. After a while, Katja followed her. I would be so sad, she said, to think that you could ever do something like that. Monika promised her it was

nonsense. On my mother's life. You don't give a shit about your mother, Katja said.

Pastor Daniel had found out that Monika needed money and offered her work as a gardener. When she showed up, she could tell that he was suspicious. There was a lot to be done on the church grounds, he said. He supposed he could use her. A couple of days later, she walked home after a day in the garden, dressed in old clothes, mud on her boots, to find everyone waiting for her in the living room, not just Katja and Elli but most of her close friends, people from other bands, the pastor himself. They had set up a sort of courtroom. They sat around the walls.

Elli went first. Monika had left with some policemen after the fight at the gig. She'd claimed they were harassing her, but many people in the room had seen pictures that told a different story. What pictures? From a folder, Elli produced a grainy black-and-white photograph of her talking to Roll-neck outside the electroplating workshop. It must have been taken from far away.

I fed a cat here. And named her.
 Creaturely orange, she disappeared on Hankou Road.
 It broke up my whole day. I had that small burst of fantasy
 of our life together, me and her,
 a new origin story that keeps repeating.
 It says: here, here, here. An eternal present that keeps loss at bay.
 That is the trick of this city. It looks like a weird hope,
 the human species struck by a wondrous asymmetry.
 There is a dimension where the cat stays.
 Where I stay, too. There is a version
 where the world goes uncrushed,
 and instead my beloveds multiply,
 and with them, their laughter.
 We all wake to simultaneous dawns
 breaking over Hong Kong and Nairobi,
 Guatemala City and Madrid.
 When one beloved says good morning,
 another says, good morning.
 And for another, maybe it is still night.
 Here it comes again. Night.
 It starts over, but this time
 we have tails and survive.
 We come when called.

—*Megan Fernandes*

Who gave her the photograph? She kept asking, but Elli carried on. There were a lot of reasons to be suspicious. Monika had just attached herself to their group. She had no friends, except the ones she'd met through them. Had she been ordered to worm her way in? Elli wasn't afraid to give her opinion. Monika was a snitch. She should leave.

What hurt most was the way Katja looked at her. As if she were a bug or a spider. With a feeling like sinking into icy water, Monika understood what her future would be. These people had picked her up and invited her in. Elli was right: without them she had no one. And now they were telling her to go.

They didn't even let her stay there that night. She was told she could come back for her things in the morning. She didn't know where to go and it was late and the weather was warm, so she slept in a park. That was what she did for a couple of days, hung around in the park, until she was so tired and hungry that she fell asleep on a bench in the middle of the afternoon and woke up to find it dark and a couple of cops shaking her. They put her in a cell over-

night, and told her she'd be charged with vagrancy. She really didn't care. She didn't see what difference it made.

In the morning they let her out, and Roll-neck was waiting on the street, looking like the cat that got the cream. I thought we'd lost you, he said. That would have been a shame. She let him put her in the car. She knew she smelled bad, and she didn't care. They drove to Prenzlauer Berg, through the streets of war-damaged tenements, and as they got closer she could feel the horror creeping up. She realized where he was taking her. There was a line of police vans parked around the corner from the building. He drew up behind them. The thing is, he said, if you'd cooperated when I first asked you, all the people asleep in there would still be your friends. You'd be in there sleeping, too, instead of out here. It wouldn't have had much of an effect on your life. A chat every week or two. A cup of coffee. Things would have gone on much as normal. And instead all this has to happen. Why? Because you gave us no choice. Order must be kept. Now please watch. He gave a signal to a man who

blew a whistle. In ones and twos, dozens of police officers jumped out of the vans and doubled round the corner.

In the year or so that she'd been living at the band house, more people had moved in. The building had turned into a little community. Roll-neck got out of the car and opened the rear door. Come on, he said. She refused. He told her not to test his patience and began to stroll across the street. She followed him, her feet like lead. The police had herded the tenants down into the courtyard. They stood there, shivering in their nightclothes, listening to the sound of their apartments being searched, bangs and crashes echoing in the stairwells. People she knew, Katja and Elli among them, stared openmouthed as Roll-neck walked her in from the street. Surrounded by high gray walls, he stuck his hands in his pockets and began to whistle, a jaunty little tune to accompany him as he ambled about, exploring. She followed behind, because staying in the courtyard would have been even worse. He visited almost every occupied apartment in the building, blandly unconcerned about the destruction going on all around him. Monika watched policemen pull out drawers, tip books and records off shelves as Roll-neck peered around like a tourist in an old church. Finally, he pushed open the door of Katja and Elli's place. She saw the pile of kindling that had been their living-room furniture, their clothes ground underfoot. The basin and toilet had been smashed, and water was pooling on the bathroom floor, which was covered in unsleeved records, grimy with boot prints. She looked out of the window. From the other side of the courtyard, she heard the sound of glass breaking, someone crying.

As she stood in the apartment that had been her home, Monika felt completely dissociated, as if she no longer occupied her body. It was self-protective, she supposed. A way of distancing herself from what was happening to her. Roll-neck walked her down the stairs, half supporting her. And when she broke down in the car afterward, when she began shaking and screaming, he spoke kindly to her, rubbing her back and offering her a handkerchief. He knew it was unpleasant, but he had to make her see how things were. This was how

REFRESHER COURSE



the world worked. He would have liked her to be useful in Berlin, but there were other places, too. He would find her somewhere else to live, give her a new start. He made her feel grateful to him. Then he took her to an office where she wrote out a document, a declaration that she was loyal to the G.D.R., and was cooperating with the Ministry for State Security of her own free will.

She moved out of Berlin. The Stasi used her in other cities, where she wasn't known. She was taken to places where the band had played and told to get back in touch with people she'd met when she still belonged to herself, when she was, as she put it, "still a person." In a few cases the contacts had heard rumors about the police raid and wanted nothing to do with her. But others welcomed her, gave her a meal or somewhere to stay, and she paid them back by making reports, reports that caused trouble for them, opened up the possibility of harassment, or prison.

Roll-neck would meet her in hotel rooms or private apartments. There was always somewhere to which he had the

key. He often brought a bottle and would badger her to drink with him. She usually refused, until one evening she was sent to a poetry reading at an apartment in Leipzig. The poets were good people, and she felt shitty enough about reporting on them that when Roll-neck was debriefing her she said yes to the offer of a glass. Later on, when everything was blurry, she let him take her to the bedroom and do what he wanted. She was aware, from a great distance, of Roll-neck's white body, his grinding and whimpering, his ragged breathing next to her on the pillow after he came. She felt almost tenderly toward him. After all, he was the only one. The only one who knew her, who listened to her, who cared if she lived or died.

By this point, she felt she had no inside. She was a sort of hall or public gallery that people could walk about in as they pleased. Gradually Roll-neck found her less useful. The targets she was supposed to observe became suspicious. They could tell something about her was wrong. She was drinking more and more and one night got into a fight at a bar and used a heavy ashtray on

another woman, who was badly hurt. A broken nose, a cracked skull. She was arrested and charged with assault. Roll-neck did nothing to help. He told her that the situation was her own fault. He washed his hands of her. She was sentenced to eighteen months in the women's prison at Hoheneck, a grim red brick fortress on a hill above a Saxon market town. It had a bad reputation, and the reality was worse. Sleeping in a dormitory. Up at five for labor, sewing tablecloths and bed linens under signs extolling order and cleanliness. There was never a moment when she was unobserved.

After she got out, she moved to Potsdam and eventually found work in a factory canteen. She served and swept and scrubbed, and tried her best, as far as possible, never to speak to another living soul. Then one day she arrived to find the canteen workers gathered round a radio, listening as if their lives depended on what the announcer was saying. Hadn't she heard? The borders were open in Hungary. She didn't believe it. She thought it must be a ruse, a way to entrap traitors. From then on, things moved very fast. The G.D.R. began to collapse. People were packing and leaving for the West. Not her. She wasn't fooled. It was impossible to believe that the whole system would fold just like that.

Everything happened without her. The dancing on the Wall, the champagne, the banners hanging in the stairwells of the occupied Stasi buildings. She didn't even visit the West until almost a year after the change. A day walking around the other side of the city, looking in the windows of the shops. She went into the KaDeWe, the big department store, and rode the glass elevator up and down. When she came to the food hall, the luxurious displays of chocolate and fruit and delicatessen goods, she couldn't take it anymore and hurried away. She did not belong in such a place.

Soon enough, the secrets started to come out. Researchers were looking through the Stasi files, trying to reconstruct documents that had been hastily shredded or burned. Victims wanted to talk about who had done what. There were ugly scenes on the TV, media denunciations. Friends found out the truth

about friends. Heroes turned out to have feet of clay.

Maybe it was a sign of her naïveté, or her isolation, but it didn't occur to Monika that any of that would touch her. After all, who was she? Nobody. Nothing.

She didn't recognize the man who came to the door, until he reminded her that he used to write a fanzine. Then she remembered him, one of the Köpenick boys. He used to wear a dog collar and an army shirt. Turned out he'd done well in the new Germany, learned the tricks. He was now a journalist for a big weekly news magazine. Out of his writing he'd squeezed a watch and a fancy tape recorder and a little VW Golf, parked on the street outside. He wanted to put certain questions to her, accusations of an unpleasant nature. Documents showed that she had been an informer. She'd sent people to prison. Go away, she said. She had nothing to say to him.

Though she never read what he wrote, her neighbors did. They began to spit on the ground when she walked past and let their dogs do their business outside her door. Someone pushed a note through the letter box, calling her terrible names. By that time she had another job, quite a nice one, serving lunch to children at a kindergarten. One day a teacher told her that "someone like her" had no business near children. They didn't fire her. They didn't have to. She took her things and never went back.

Through all this, she had doubts. Everyone said that the Stasi was gone, but was it really true? For her, it had simply sunk underground, into the walls and the floorboards, the fabric of things. Objects still moved around in her apartment. She'd find the tea in the coffee jar, her books in a different order on her shelves. There were unexplained setbacks. A stolen bike, lost parcels at the post office. All of it was suspicious.

The texture of her reality was soft, spongy. She couldn't trust that anything would take her weight. She often wondered what had happened to Roll-neck. Sometimes it was as if he were still with her. At any time he might walk in, smirking and carrying a bottle of cheap booze. And then quite unexpectedly she saw him, standing in the cold, sell-

ing pickles at a street market. He was wearing a cap with earflaps, and his breath was spilling out in a frosty plume, and somehow the sight of him, wrapped in his hat and scarf, offering samples to the shoppers, was pathetic. It was like a balloon bursting. Finally she could believe that it was gone, the thing whose face he had been. She hurried away before he could spot her. That night she cried as she hadn't done for years.

Little by little, she made a life for herself. One with small dimensions, but safe and sustainable. Sometimes at weekends she packed a picnic and went to the lake, or took a bus out to the countryside. Then came the revelations about Katja, and everything was difficult again. Naturally, with the fall of the Wall, Katja had become an important person. It was inevitable, a woman with her charisma. After her days in the band, she'd been part of the movement for democracy. She'd written poetry and made speeches and chanted slogans. At the reunification ceremony she'd even been invited to sing a song at the Brandenburg Gate. She was an artist, an activist, a victim of the Stasi, a national symbol of resilience in the face of oppression. She'd just published a memoir when they found her file, and for Monika it felt like the night of the skinhead attack all over again, when she'd turned round to find Tommy standing in the doorway. The shock was just as great.

When she looked back, it seemed to Monika that her best memories of Katja were actually invented. She had usually been kind, but it was the sort of kindness that cost nothing. She'd always won so effortlessly, and no one had ever thought to question how she did it. Now it seemed so obvious, the ease with which she could get hold of things, make things happen. Monika could barely process what was in the articles, couldn't draw it into the circle of her imagination, so she made an appointment at the office that handled the Stasi archives. She was allowed to read only the material that pertained to her, but that was enough. Katja had been recruited by the Ministry for State Security in high school. She was described as "highly motivated," and "committed to the cause of socialism." She had reported everything,

worked as hard as she could to undermine the influence of the decadent West. Most of Roll-neck's cruelties—the way he'd pressured her, the guilt he'd made her feel—had served no useful purpose at all, because Katja had already been telling them everything. It was even more perverse than she'd imagined. In a secret ceremony, during the time that they were in the band, the Stasi had awarded Katja a medal and the rank of captain. Finally Monika understood the purpose of parading her in front of her friends on the day of the raid. It had been to protect Katja, to divert suspicion from their real asset.

This time she read the newspapers. A tabloid printed a picture of Katja holding up a hand to ward off a photographer. There were other pictures, interviews with people the band had known in Berlin, all saying how shocked they were to discover the truth about their famous friend. There was a brief revival of interest in D.G.F., the three-piece band with two informers. Monika moved again, though that didn't stop a journalist from finding her and following her down the street to ask about her Stasi "colleague." After a month or two, things died down again.

And that was more or less that. She did a lot of drinking and tried to work out what she would say to her friend if she ever saw her again. Ten years after reunification, someone found Katja in a small South German town and persuaded her to give an interview for a TV documentary. Monika barely recognized her. She'd got fat, and her hair was badly dyed. The bohemian disorder of her youth had become an ugly jumble. She was breeding dogs, or rabbits, or something. Animals for pet shops. She said she didn't regret what she'd done. She'd followed her heart. So what if things had changed around her? She'd turned out not to be right about the world. That was true of many young people. Who could see into the future? A few months later, Monika saw Katja's face again, in a newspaper obituary. She had gone out to the Wannsee and walked into the water. She had taken a lot of sleeping pills and filled a backpack with rocks. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Hari Kunzru on privacy and surveillance.

THE CRITICS



ON TELEVISION

I WILL SURVIVE

"I May Destroy You," on HBO.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

Who hasn't been there? A deadline looms, but inspiration won't come. In the pilot of *"I May Destroy You,"* a mesmerizing twelve-episode series for HBO and BBC One, written and co-directed by the aggressively free-minded Michaela Coel, Arabella (Coel), a young East London writer who owes her book agents a draft, abandons her laptop and slips into the night—just for an hour. She and an acquaintance drift to a place called Ego Death Bar. A late-night crew parties and shares a round of shots. At some point, the bar begins to disintegrate and blur. Arabella dizzily claws her way to the door. Is the scene comedic? Then a temporal blackness: Arabella bolts awake at her writing desk, a gash on her forehead. Somehow, she meets her deadline, but the next day a reel of horrible action colonizes her brain: a man, sweating and panting, thrusting in a bathroom stall. It will be a while before she can acknowledge that the image is a memory. Many of us have been there.

Coel, who is thirty-two, was born to Ghanaian parents and grew up in East London public housing with her mother and sister. A prodigiously talented writer, director, showrunner, and actor, she has an anthropological interest in all kinds of physical congress, in what happens when one body encounters another. In 2015, she made *"Chewing Gum,"* a joyful series adapted from a one-woman play she wrote while in acting school, in which she portrayed Tracey Gordon, an awkward virgin fanatically attempting to shed her chastity. Tracey's entrance into womanhood is a cringe comedy: dressed in nauseating tribal costume,

she dances for a white paramour, the seduction a hilarious failure of grunts and flailing limbs. Coel is an astonishingly inventive physical performer; a cerebral clown, she brings to mind, in her wiriness, and her willingness to contort her angular face, both Lucille Ball and Kim Wayans. Coel treats sex as slapstick and desire as an embarrassment, and finds a freedom in abjection. This black woman cannot live, or create, in the margins.

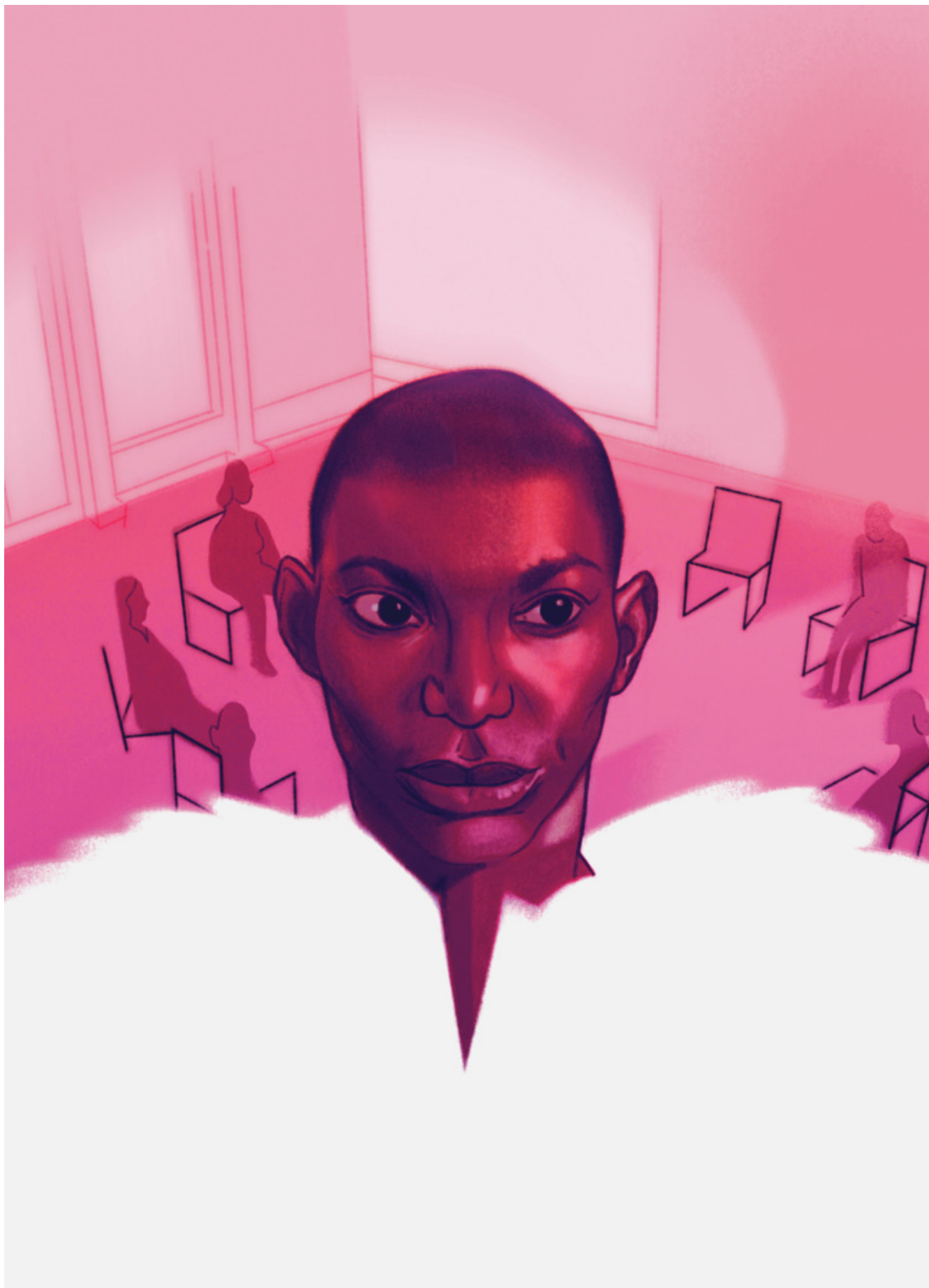
Like *"Chewing Gum,"* which drew on an early-adult dalliance Coel had with Christianity, *"I May Destroy You"* is a semi-fictional portrait of the artist and her social world. In 2018, Coel revealed that she had been drugged and assaulted while working on Season 2 of *"Chewing Gum."* Arabella, like Coel until a few years ago, lives in a cluttered East London flat with a gentle white male roommate, Ben (Stephen Wight), who supports her like a piece of old furniture. Coel and Sam Miller direct the series with an unaffected intimacy—we hardly notice how many shots of Arabella feature her sitting on the toilet, her panties hugging her calves. Arabella has improvised a family in her mates Kwame (Paapa Essiedu), a gay aerobics instructor with a Grindr addiction, and Terry (Weruche Opia), an aspiring actress. The world of these characters, who have scrambled together their own avant-garde, feels lived-in. Combat boots are scuffed; there's not a lot of money, but everyone wants to be seen, flirted with, consumed. Arabella carries with her a trippy ikat-print bomber jacket like a comfort blanket, and loves her pink ombré wig like someone who's been told that she alone can

get away with wearing such a flashy thing.

Essiedu and Opia are understated and frequently superb, while Coel channels her enormous energy into a stand-out performance. A wreck of charisma, Arabella dodges inquiries about the status of her book, willing her white agents into shell-shocked submission. At a trashy night club in Ostia, Italy, where Arabella sojourns with Terry on the publishing agency's dime, she gets high on "ket" and coke and upstages the go-go dancers. She lives precariously, attracting bemused protectors; as she staggers out of the night club, the moralizing drug dealer Biagio (Marouane Zotti) follows her home, picking up the house keys that she drops, and later becomes her on-off boyfriend. As ever, in Coel's hands, cheer can turn to darkness in an instant. Soon after her night at Ego Death Bar, Arabella, realizing what must have happened, calls Terry: "Yo, T., I just got spiked, you know." At the police station, she describes to two kindly female officers the image that has been replaying in her mind. "Who is he looking at?" one of the policewomen asks. Arabella, who has been quipping and alert, suddenly shrinks and crumbles, hiding her face in her sweater.

Arabella's philosophy of art is distinct from that of her creator. Explaining her career path, she tells another writer, "Everyone on Twitter was, like, 'You should make a book.'" For Arabella—the author of the self-published *"Chronicles of a Fed-Up Millennial,"* drawn from her viral tweets—writing is either something to avoid or an act of improvisational bombast. Her black fans often stop her on the street, shouting her pithy

ABOVE: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ



In her new show, Michaela Coel, a prodigiously talented writer, director, and performer, takes on life after sexual assault.

ILLUSTRATION BY XIA GORDON

THE NEW YORKER, JULY 6 & 13, 2020

67

sullivan + associates
ARCHITECTS



martha's vineyard

100% organic
COTTON BEDDING

Made in the USA: Grown to Sewn

Luxuriously soft. Woven to last a lifetime.

4 pillowcases with every queen and king set

AmericanBlossomLinens.com 888-825-0110

15% off code
NewYorker15



Your Anniversary
Immortalized
in Roman Numerals

3-Day Rush Available!
Crafted from Gold and Platinum
JOHN-CHRISTIAN.COM

OR CALL 888.646.6466

Sit well – the new Nautilus Chair.



A design homage
to mid-century
Danish lounges. An
authentic, original
design made in Maine.

Request a
complimentary
catalog @chiltons.com.



chiltons.com

866-883-3366

CHILTON FURNITURE CO.

DEPRESSION
IS COMMON

THAT DOESN'T
MEAN IT'S SIMPLE
OUR PROVEN
CARE CAN HELP

844.335.5140

mclean.org/depression

Wear our
new official
hat to show
your love.



newyorkerstore.com/hats

sayings back to her. Coel, by contrast, a meticulous psychological observer, resists rhetoric; her ear is so attuned to the rhythm of East London chatter that, when characters talk shit to one another, it feels not written but overheard.

“I May Destroy You” is a beguiling study of friendship and casual trauma and writing as a path—albeit not a simple one—to reinvention. The arc of the narrative deals with the aftermath of Arabella’s assault. She tries not to dwell on it. “I just make sure I’m around someone, anyone,” she tells her therapist. “If I’m not, I say, ‘There are hungry children . . . not everyone has a smartphone.’” On the therapist’s advice, she takes up painting. She experiences panic on seeing a waiter serve glasses of water in a hotel lobby. She shaves her head, then goes back to the wig. Her symptoms blend into the usual chaos of her adult life, becoming baggage and also momentum. “I May Destroy You” embraces sprawling tangents, and these further furnish its nonjudgmental world view. Two episodes take us back to Arabella’s adolescence, in which she and Terry act as unwitting protectors of the entitled black teen-age boys around them. In another episode, an adult Arabella grapples with the memory of her rolling-stone father’s infidelity. Coel exerts a kinetic control over the story’s many threads and characters—especially the calm Kwame, the attitudinal opposite of Arabella, who is also a victim of sexual assault. The tone is never stable. “I May Destroy You” is a hangout vehicle, a detective story, a nonlinear travelogue, and a comic bildungsroman. Because Coel focusses on hustling black women and black queer people, I could say that the show is political, but mostly the writing steers away from didacticism. It resides in the gray areas of the post-liberation sexual economy: the punishingly banal moment when a consensual hookup between two men turns forceful; the awkward atmosphere when a gay black man goes stealth, thinking that he can find safety in a white woman, who, in turn, fetishizes black men.

In “I May Destroy You,” violation is the omnipresent, cultural weather. Coel treats perpetrators with curiosity, and refuses to infantilize or pity the victims. In the fourth episode, Arabella’s exas-

perated agents suggest that she confer with a Cambridge graduate, Zain (Karan Gill), also a writer. At the meeting, Arabella blushes as he finishes her sentences. The two end up having sex; Zain removes the condom without Arabella’s consent. At first, Arabella is merely annoyed that she has to take a morning-after pill, and they start dating. But later, listening to a podcast for sexual-assault survivors, Arabella concludes that Zain breached a boundary. At an event for writers hosted by her publishing company, she takes the stage and outs him publicly. “He is a rapist,” she says, high on her strange new power. “Not rape-adjacent, or a bit rape-y—he’s a rapist.” Her dramatic speech breaks the Internet, and she becomes a sort of rape-survivor influencer, a phenomenon of our confused time. Isn’t it the dark genius of many black women artists to turn their hardship into material? Her gift is the ability to create communion around the particularities of her race, her gender, her voice. When Arabella suggests that she pivot the topic of her book, her publisher, a haughty black woman, shouts, “Rape! Fantastic!” Later, Arabella develops a queasy friendship with an old high-school acquaintance, Theo (portrayed with eerie subtlety by Harriet Webb and, in flashback, Gaby French), who runs a therapy group for sexual-assault survivors, and who similarly draws on victimhood for affirmation.

In the so-called #MeToo era, there is a basic hunger for narratives of sexual assault and consent. How can artists maintain their creative dignity when encouraged to exploit their own selves? Coel’s honest mimicry of empowerment talk, and her depiction of the murky appeal of the social-media outrage cycle, at times approach the satirical. Toward the end of the series, some of its daring tonal ambiguity is lost, as plotlines are coerced into social commentary. But at its best this show is abrasively psychological; it is, as all good art can be, “triggering,” because it sounds and feels and moves the way we do. In Coel’s universe, as in ours, pleasurable experiences are everywhere imperilled, always risky, always subject to audit. And yet we yearn for experience. We tend toward survival and evolution. We put our trauma to use. We finish the goddam book. ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE ART OF THE UNRULY

Joyce Carol Oates went to war against the literary fetish for form—and won.

BY LEO ROBSON



In Joyce Carol Oates's novel "Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart" (1990), Jinx Fairchild, a star high-school athlete, is assigned a five-hundred-word paper on the topic "I Believe." To his surprise, Jinx finds himself endlessly tweaking the essay—"in a ferocity of concentration," Oates tells us, "as singleminded as his concentration on basketball." The aim of this "exhausting" process is not to sharpen his syntax or to clarify his thinking but to present the truth as he perceives it and to demonstrate his newfound sense that "words on paper" can be "expressions of the soul."

It's hardly a stretch to see an alle-

gory here for his creator's own methods—his approach to composing a credo emerging as a credo in itself. As far back as the novels in Oates's *Wonderland Quartet*, such as "Expensive People" (1968) and "them" (1969), which received the National Book Award fifty years ago this fall, Oates has deployed her zeal for revision to forge a style of rousing roughness. Her dozens of novels and hundreds of short stories, many of them set in western New York, forgo an air of cool mastery in favor of a kind of cultivated vulnerability, an openness to engulfment. Human existence, in her handling, seems a primarily somatic enterprise, and her greedily adjectival

prose can sometimes read like a sort of dramatized phenomenology. Even on a bustling city street, her characters can come across as frontierspeople, or toilers on a polar expedition. As she invokes a world of pounding hearts and thumping ears and watering mouths, she exhibits a refreshing freedom from embarrassment, an indifference to the concept of overkill.

Oates's friend the novelist John Gardner once suggested that she try writing a story "in which things go well, for a change." That hasn't happened yet. Her latest book, the enormous and frequently brilliant "Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars." (Ecco)—the forty-ninth novel she has published, if you exclude the ones she has written under pseudonyms—is a characteristic work. It begins with an act of police brutality, and proceeds to document the multifarious consequences for the victim's wife and children: alcoholism, low-level criminality, marital breakdown, incipient nervous collapse. In a 1977 journal entry, Oates acknowledged that her work turns instinctively toward what she called "the central, centralizing act of violence that seems to symbolize something beyond itself." Perhaps the most heavily ironic statement in her oeuvre comes in her second novel, "A Garden of Earthly Delights" (1967), when a woman says, "Nobody killed nobody, this is the United States," while the most characteristic piece of exposition may be found in "Little Bird of Heaven" (2009): "Daddy was bringing me home on that November evening not long before his death-by-firing-squad to a house from which he'd been banished by my mother." Among contemporary American fiction writers—and, since the deaths of Philip Roth and Toni Morrison, she possesses a strong claim to preëminence—Oates most clearly displays what Henry James called "the imagination of disaster," a faculty or frailty she often gives to her creations. ("Sometimes she thought idly about earthquakes, fires, buildings cracking in two," we read in "them." "She thought of fires, of bulldozers leveling trees and buildings.")

But where James wanted to tame his sense that life was ferocious and sinister, contingent and multiple, Oates taps her feeling of inner chaos as a creative

Oates in New York, June 5, 1995 (contact print).

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AVEDON

THE NEW YORKER, JULY 6 & 13, 2020

69



*"Got a message from Dimitri in Athens. He says
your thumb is crushing his house."*

resource. James said that the artist's eternal problem was how to create a geometric pattern that disguises the fact that "relations stop nowhere"; Oates has talked of the elastic and the fluid. In 1968, she voiced a desire to publish "a long work with many characters, many events, a jagged and unclear plot, closely tied in with 'reality'"—a formulation that would have kept James awake for months—and, whatever the charges that have been levelled at Oates's work, she cannot be accused of failing to realize this ambition.

In books as disparate as her first novel, the star-crossed romance *"With Shuddering Fall"* (1964), the celebrated urban epics *"them"* and *"Wonderland"* (1971), the unfairly derided mystic-politico-psychosexual thriller *"The Assassins"* (1975), the academic chamber piece *"Marya: A Life"* (1986), the Eisenhower-era chronicle *"You Must Remember This"* (1987), the Marilyn Monroe bio-fiction *"Blonde"* (2000), and the post-9/11 small-town mystery *"Carthage"* (2014), characters insist that experience is a mess of shards and shreds. Jessalyn McClaren, in *"Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars."*, reflects that the mental mode she calls "widow-think," far from helping her to navigate changed circumstances, is nothing more than "a barely controlled panic of neurons crazily firing."

Even in a receptive climate, such an

aesthetic would surely prove divisive, and the conditions have often been harsh. If Jinx Fairchild, straining to express his soul, is a stand-in for Oatesian principles, then Mrs. Dunphy, the senior-year English teacher, could be said to embody official literary standards. (The scene takes place in 1957.) She gives Jinx a D-plus and insists that he was lucky not to receive an F. "You know the rule," she says. "No run-on sentences." When Jinx resubmits his assignment, he receives a B-plus and the message is clear—in playing it safe, he is denying himself the opportunity to achieve something transcendent. Oates's portrayal of killjoy politesse might be seen as a nose thumbed at grudging book reviewers, but her attitude toward Mrs. Dunphy's strictures has deeper roots.

A high-achieving product of nineteen-fifties academe—she was the valedictorian of her graduating class at Syracuse University, in 1960—Oates rejected what she saw as the prevailing pieties of literary conduct: "symmetry, unity of tone, precision." In a study of D. H. Lawrence's poetry—one of a series of strikingly ambitious literary essays she has published—she took aim at the rationalist agenda promoted by the eminent critic R. P. Blackmur, who had led the Henry James revival in 1934,

with an edition of James's prefaces (*"The Art of the Novel"*). In an essay on Dostoyevsky's *"The Possessed,"* Oates lamented that critics with a "Jamesian sensibility . . . simply cannot see" the structure of longer novels, and argued that the loose baggy monster—in James's notorious phrase—"is loose and baggy and monstrous only to the critic who confuses his own relative short-sightedness with an aesthetic principle."

Oates wasn't alone in this crusade—at least, not at first. In 1949, when she was a schoolgirl in Niagara County, the Nobel Prize was awarded to William Faulkner, a writer who was steeped in the work of Dostoyevsky and dismissed James as a "prig." Many of the best-known novelists who emerged during those years—Lessing, Bellow, Mailer, Styron—had paid tribute to the Russian model. In criticism, too, escape routes from the formalist cul-de-sac were taken up in, notably, Iris Murdoch's polemics *"The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited"* (1959) and *"Against Dryness"* (1961), and in Frank Kermode's *"The Sense of an Ending"* (1967), a study of "the dilemma of fiction and reality" that considers the devices used by *"The Idiot."* And Blackmur himself had a change of heart, embracing a radical new position that yielded essays such as *"The Loose and Baggy Monsters of Henry James"* (1951) and a study of the European novel that dwells on the work of Dostoyevsky, presented as explicitly superior to the products of "form."

What distinguishes Oates's record is not just longevity but doggedness. For a while, she had a kindred spirit in Iris Murdoch, who, around 1970, started writing novels in a mode that Oates called "self-consciously 'Russian,'" being "looser, freer, more ribald," notable for a "breathless, plunging, unedited" voice and "unresolved, troubling, provocative endings." By contrast, Bellow's books became shorter and tidier, and, anyway, for all the creative ebullience—the "waterfalls of self-displaying energy"—exhibited in a novel like *"Humboldt's Gift,"* his had always been, in Oates's view, an art of "accommodation, not terror." And Oates's contemporary Anne Tyler, a onetime grad student in Slavic studies whose early books "resembled the meandering of streams," had been seduced by the charms of conventional

structure. Oates, all the while, favored the flood over the levee, while striving to curb the mysticism and the slaloming plotlines of the books she published in the years after completing the *Wonderland Quartet*. Exorbitant attacks appeared (one by James Wolcott, in *Harper's*, was titled “Stop Me Before I Write Again”). But despite her view that J. D. Salinger’s “dignified withdrawal into silence is understandable,” given the “jeering and dismissive” critical response to his last published work, silence was never likely to be her path.

Like Philip Roth, who followed a late-sixties sensation (“Portnoy’s Complaint”) with a series of near-misses and outright duds and then regrouped, Oates produced an amazing run of books, starting in the mid-nineteen-eighties, with a similar emphasis on history and autobiography, which has continued today, notably “Marya,” “Because It Is Bitter,” “Black Water” (1992), “What I Lived For” (1994), “Zombie” (1995), “Blonde,” “Missing Mom” (2005), “The Gravedigger’s Daughter” (2007), “Carthage,” and “A Book of American Martyrs” (2017). She has received a shelf’s worth of lifetime-achievement awards—including, in May, the Institut de France’s two-hundred-thousand-euro Prix Mondial Cino Del Duca. If this feat of rallying and renewal has not attained the same legendary status as the achievement known as “late Roth,” it is partly because Roth found a palatable compromise—coursing fluency repurposed as oratorical clarity—while Oates refused to adapt her vision of how a novel should behave. Just as Jules, in “them,” aspires “to break free of the morass of the flesh” and become “pure spirit,” so Oates has wanted to do away with customary modes of reference and description, to be free to write in a way “quite unredeemed by poetic grace,” in a phrase from her study of D. H. Lawrence. (She described the language in one of her novels as “deliberately clumsy at times.”) She has wanted to be able to leave behind, when it suits her purposes, the embankments of orderly syntax and plot. That her counter-aesthetic represents a set of convictions, and not any deficiencies of technique, was made plain, in 1996, by the publication of “We Were the Mulvaney,” which appeared on the *Times* best-seller list and was chosen for

Oprah’s Book Club. It’s a classically accomplished piece of work, with resemblances to Roth’s “American Pastoral.”

Oates’s latest novel begins more or less where “We Were the Mulvaney” more or less ended, in an intensive-care unit, with the death of a patriarch. The opening scene takes place on an afternoon in the fall of 2010, when Whitey McClaren, a sixty-seven-year-old businessman and onetime mayor of Hammond, New York, pulls off the highway near his home town, just beyond a “grimy and graffiti-defaced” overpass, to approach a pair of patrol cops in the process of attacking a “dark-skinned young man,” and is beaten up and then tased. (“Trying to rise. Oh but his heart is pounding—hard.”) From this briskly brutal scene, Oates spins a seven-hundred-and-eighty-page portrait of rumination, recrimination, and renewal. “Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars.”—the title comes from Whitman—is a novel of aftermath, an epilogue drawn to epic length, the story of what happens to a group of people robbed of their “lynchpin” or “anchor.” (Oates employed a similar narrative strategy in “Assassins” and in her 2001 novel “Middle Age: A Romance.”)

“We Were the Mulvaney” was rare among Oates’s books in using a single first-person narrator. The new novel is written in her favored roaming third person, and is told from more than half a dozen perspectives. There are two Mc-



Claren sons: Thom, in his late thirties, the second-in-command at McClaren, Inc.—a commercial printer that long ago diversified—and the runt of the litter, Virgil, a thirty-one-year-old artist and dropout. There are three daughters, Beverly (prom queen turned bored housewife), Lorene (local high-school principal), and Sophia (a pharmaceutical-lab assistant), as well as Jessalyn, their beloved “mommy.” Whitey’s death sends the remaining McClarens into

various crises—prompting Sophia, for example, to reexamine everything she previously knew, from familiar roads to professional habits. (She no longer feels comfortable killing animals for lab tests.)

Family life is a suitable subject for a novelist with Oates’s emphases. As well as serving as a mirror of mores, a site for drama and violence (“a battleground,” in the words of one character), it is also an occasion for sensory description, challenging the writer to convey what the psychoanalyst R. D. Laing called “the texture, the taste one might say,” of familial experience. The family unit is also a breeding ground for myth. “You may have thought our family was larger,” Judd Mulvaney recalls; in the new novel, it isn’t long before we discover that there’s more to Whitey McClaren than his “good-natured and approachable” persona.

And so the family theme mobilizes Oates’s essential skepticism. Although she has written frequently about social injustices—“them” culminates in the 1967 Detroit riot—she is not so much a realist as an impressionist, with a gift for a poetic and idiosyncratic kind of group portraiture. “Impossible to characterize our family’s experience,” a man reflects in the early pages of her best-selling gothic saga “Bellefleur” (1980): “Are we beset by tragedy, or merely farce?—or melodrama?—or pranks of fate, sheer happenstance, that cannot be deciphered?” There is no answer, and no higher force to whom we might appeal for judgment. As the narrator of her Princeton-set horror novel, “The Accursed,” warns, in an author’s note, “There may be multiple, and competing, histories; as there are multiple, and competing, eyewitness accounts.” Or, in Judd’s words, “What is a family, after all, except memories?” To Oates, the reality of family life is social reality in excelsis, and perhaps the ultimate subject for a novel. (Many of Oates’s favorite works in the form—“The Brothers Karamazov,” “Women in Love,” “The Sound and the Fury”—tussle with saga conventions.)

The pinballing point of view of Oates’s novel unsettles any fixed concept of the local institution known as “the McClarens.” When we read about “the wonder of an older brother to a younger,” this is just one of a vast number of permutations. Elsewhere, we are shown the burden represented by a younger brother to an older, and the “innocently-sisterly”

way in which the housewife Beverly can be rude to the slightly younger high-school principal Lorene; when Beverly is using her “good-daughter” voice on the phone to Jessalyn, it’s “bright-glittering like bubbles on a stream beneath which, if you looked closely, you’d see sharp-edged rocks and rubble.” The novel has been constructed to maximize flexibility. Among its fifty-two chapters is a brief composite picture entitled “Recurring Dreams of the McClaren Children.” An isolated vignette—“The Widow’s Orgy”—shows Jessalyn giddily emptying Whitey’s expensive liquor bottles into the kitchen sink. (“Oh, Mom. What on earth have you *done*.”) And toward the end, in another vignette, we are reminded that Beverly, the daughter lost in grief, is a mother, too:

Heedless Brianna came in, bounding up the stairs in jeans so tight-fitting slender legs, thighs, buttocks you could wonder (her mother wonders!) how in hell the girl can breathe, ponytail bouncing sassily behind her, of course Beverly lowered her voice so the girl wouldn’t hear, certain that the girl could not hear, and some minutes later there came Brianna in reverse, out of her room and down the stairs thudding on her heels with the arrogance of one who weighs two hundred pounds and not one hundred, and again Beverly lowered her voice out of maternal discretion just as Brianna halted at the foot of the stairs and turned to her, twisting at the waist like a dancer in a brilliantly tortured posture, young face livid with indignation: “For God’s sake, Mom! Grandpa Whitey is gone.”

If Dostoyevsky was a specialist in the “dialogical,” Oates serves up something

altogether more churning and (to borrow a term of praise, from a 1977 journal entry) “agonizingly thorough.” For a while, the novel seems to be concerned with Thom’s attempt to achieve legal justice for Whitey’s death, and with his attempts to frighten off Jessalyn’s new boyfriend, Hugo Martinez, a Newark-born photographer and poet whom some of the McClaren children view as a gold-digger. (“How would Mom ever meet a *Cuban*?” Lorene wonders.) Yet neither of Thom’s projects comes to dominate our interest. And the novel is so teeming with nuances and details and inklings that you barely have time to register the irony that Whitey died in the course of defending a victim of racial profiling, despite having been soft on police violence during his time as Hammond’s mayor—or that Thom’s two causes are inherently at odds, one pertaining to the fallout of a racially charged assault, the other incipiently racist.

At times, there’s little to hold on to. But then, why should the reader be afforded the feeling of terra firma so persistently denied to the characters? As soon as Jessalyn has started enjoying the memory of the stone house at 99 Old Farm Road, filled with her five children and their five sets of friends, she corrects herself: “Well, that wasn’t accurate perhaps. By the time Virgil was old enough to bring friends home, Thom was too old to wish to bring his friends home; not to mention those girlfriends of Thom’s he hadn’t dared bring home.”

When she reflects that “a widow’s life” is “a posthumous life; a left-over life, you could say,” she realizes that putting such a melancholy truth into words makes it “sound exalted and profound somehow,” when in fact the widow’s condition was “a diminishment, like a wizened pea or a crumpled napkin.” But even to say *that* is “to hope to inflate the diminishment, and in this hope there was folly.” Cliché after cliché is tested and then dispatched, along with any sense of consolation.

Oates’s habits are designed to unsettle us and, though pleasure is never out of the equation, the novel avoids many traditional narrative strategies for ginning up tension. The reader is shown, long before any of the surviving characters are, the circumstances of the novel’s central narrative event. Whitey’s roadside encounter with the Hammond police is presented as answers to a series of factual questions (Why did he pull over? Where had he been driving from?). And a character can be introduced with the syntactic equivalent of a four-car pileup:

Just a glance at Thom McClaren, tall and rangy-limbed, sandy-haired, handsome face now just perceptibly beginning to thicken, in his late thirties—(Virgil often stared, when [he believed] Thom wasn’t aware of him)—you could see that Thom was one of those persons who feels very good about himself, and his self-estimate is (largely) shared by those who gaze upon him.

(The brackets are hers.) Now and again, you’re reminded of Martin Amis’s grievance that, though James Joyce could take you anywhere, he keeps taking you places you don’t want to go.

And yet there is great joy to be derived from the novel’s submerged patterns, its mind-boggling fecundity, its gallimaufry of devices (stream of consciousness, analytic omniscience, sentences both snaking and staccato), its combination of intricacy and lucidity. An early chapter called “The Seed” moves from the McClaren children waking up in the family home, via some reflections on sibling order, to an unsituated flashback of Virgil explaining that he wants to drift like a cottonwood seed, and his father telling him that a seed is supposed to take root and grow. The evocation of an extended period (“In his twenties he’d



disappeared for weeks, months at a time”) then settles into a dramatic scene, a debate between Virgil and Whitey on the concept of “use”; Whitey thinks that “we are here on earth to be of use,” while Virgil wants to know “what kind of use, for whose use, at what price to the user.” The debate, in which Jessalyn “intervened, gently,” is seen from various perspectives: Sophia, usually Virgil’s ally, hopes this time that their father will rebuke him; “the McClaren siblings” collectively notice that Virgil never seems hurt by Whitey’s remarks; Virgil thinks, “This was unfair! And inaccurate!”; and Whitey feels frustrated that he cannot defeat his own son in argument, while regretting that he had agreed to give him that eccentric name. (“Not likely . . . that he’d have such frustrating experiences with a son named Matthew.”) The rest of the chapter can- ters through Virgil’s past: loving poetry and painting as a “dreamy child”; enrolling at Oberlin College, and then leaving; accepting a teaching job in North Ham- mond, and then resigning; struggling to articulate his philosophy of “extreme al- truism”; and slipping into codependency with Jessalyn (“You are ‘enabling’ our son,” Whitey tells her, using a piece of newly acquired jargon). Then we slip back into the family’s bedside vigil.

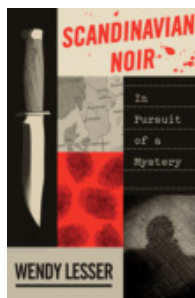
Although Oates rejects cohesion as a formal virtue, she has a coherent vision of what literature can deliver. She believes in the itching and the ornery and the oddly shaped, and has been trying to produce fiction that feels as irre- ducible to simple meanings, as resistant to paraphrase, as the subject matter it portrays. The heroic figures in “Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars.” are Jessalyn and Hugo Martinez and, perhaps above all, Virgil. The other McClaren siblings represent a bullying orthodoxy, like the “tradition-oriented critics” of the fifties.

“He doesn’t care at all that Daddy is seriously ill,” an unnamed McClaren says of Virgil, while Beverly claims that some part of Virgil’s brain is missing—“the part that is sensitive to social cues.” The four-page scene that follows, beginning “Hi, Dad,” makes it clear that Virgil cares as much as anybody. At one point, he takes a deep breath, lifts a handmade woodwind instrument to his mouth, and produces, Oates tells us, a series of ear- nest, breathy notes “so airy, you couldn’t define them as flute-sounds.” ♦



BRIEFLY NOTED

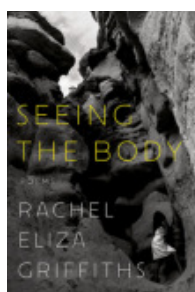
Humankind, by Rutger Bregman, translated from the Dutch by Elizabeth Manton and Erica Moore (Little, Brown). This lively social history examines pessimistic views of human nature, from Hobbes to “Lord of the Flies,” and argues that, in fact, humans are “pretty decent.” Bregman cites evolu- tionary theories on “survival of the friendliest” and psycho- logical studies showing that most people embrace evil only when it is “masquerading as good.” Such speculations, the book insists, are anything but abstract. Demonstrating how cynical views of human nature are often self-fulfilling— prison inmates treated as irredeemable have much higher recidivism rates than those who aren’t—Bregman offers a compelling case for reshaping institutions and policies along genuinely humane lines.



Scandinavian Noir, by Wendy Lesser (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Lesser, the editor of *The Threepenny Review*, reflects on her forty-year obsession with Nordic crime fiction. Surveying the genre’s themes and methods, she argues that its energy comes from the way it reveals a gap between Scandinavian civic ideals and reality. On trips to Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, she finds evidence of social failures that appear in the novels, but also much to praise: police officers who rarely use guns, a more moderate criminal-justice system. She writes of her “exuberant relief” in knowing that, “somewhere in the world, there’s a respite” from the cruelties that mar life in the U.S.



Blue Ticket, by Sophie Mackintosh (Doubleday). In this dark fable, Mackintosh explores the strictures inhibiting a wom- an’s right to choose. Living in a quietly menacing, unnamed society, Calla yearns to have a child. But she is forbidden from doing so: at a coming-of-age ceremony, she received a “blue ticket” and was implanted with an IUD. (Those given “white tickets” are expected to become happy mothers.) Try- ing to conceive, and then to escape the country with her un- born child, Calla encounters many who see her as aberrant, but she also finds other pregnant blue-ticket women, one of whom becomes a lover and a protector, and a white-ticket woman who has recently self-administered an abortion. Mac- kintosh sensitively conveys resonant questions about moth- erhood, female solidarity, queer love, and bodily autonomy.



Seeing the Body, by Rachel Eliza Griffiths (Norton). A daugh- ter mourns her mother’s death in this collection of poems, excavating her personal loss amid the wider traumas of rac- ism and misogyny. “Behind my eyes/a dead woman looks back at me with no trace/of recognition,” she writes. Griffiths, who is also a visual artist, includes a series of anguished pho- tographic self-portraits, and she is fascinated with the power of images to document and distort. In her elegiac, enraged poems, the injustices suffered by women and black people find an echo in the cosmic injustice of mortality. Ultimately, the work draws lyrical intensity from its resistance to obliv- ion and its insistence, despite despair, on life.

FAKE BOOK

What happens when David Mitchell writes a rock novel?

BY JONATHAN DEE



There's a side of rock and roll—defiant, anarchic, Dionysian, subversive, doomed, Romantic—that has always appealed to literary novelists, but that's not its only side. Plenty of its practitioners make decent music, and decent livings, without feeling the need to subvert or defy anything at all. Nor does everyone feel oppressed by celebrity; all that star-maker machinery has to get stoked with something, and for every Dylanesque refusenik in the world there are ten thousand volunteers for fame. Why shouldn't they get the literary treatment, too?

In David Mitchell's novel *"Utopia Avenue"* (Random House), four such

figures—young, reasonably talented, eager to succeed—come together to form a band of that name. They are introduced to one another by a wise and benevolent manager (maybe the first one in the history of the rock novel) named Levon Frankland, who spots them playing in other, subpar bands and has a hunch, their disparate musical influences notwithstanding, that they would sound great together. All this is set in mid-sixties London, when and where it was possible to believe uncynically that new music could change the world.

The likable quartet—Griff, Dean, Elf, and Jasper—are not really out to

change anything, though, except their fortunes. They aren't sellouts, by any stretch; they're just not pretentious about their goals. They want to find an audience, and to win over that audience. They refuse to compromise with management on any artistic decision, but they're never really asked to, because there's nothing disturbing enough about their music to make anyone try to get them to compromise it. Though they are, fictionally speaking, near-contemporaries of Bucky Wunderlick, the Garbo-like rock god at the heart of Don DeLillo's *"Great Jones Street,"* it's hard to imagine any of Utopia Avenue's members sharing Bucky's credo: "That's why we're so great. We make noise. We make it louder than anybody else and also better. Any curly-haired boy can write windswept ballads. You have to crush people's heads. That's the only way to make those fuckers listen."

Instead, the band goes through the usual succession of rough gigs in lousy halls (a brawl breaks out in one when Griff, the drummer, gets beamed by a beer bottle); they travel between engagements in a broken-down van, fondly named the Beast. They get excited the first time they hear a song of theirs on the radio. They listen in awe to "Sgt. Pepper" when it comes out. While on tour, one of them is the victim of a trumped-up drug charge. They're more pleased than disillusioned to be following this classic path. And for quite a while, until late in the book, when it more or less sheds its skin, the genre comforts of the rock novel seem all that *"Utopia Avenue"* is interested in providing.

The rock novel, broadly speaking, is less concerned with the making of music (an experience hard to translate into prose) than with authenticity of attitude: an aggressive commitment to iconoclasm and a proud aversion to bullshit. A strong line extends from DeLillo to Jonathan Lethem to Jennifer Egan to Eleanor Henderson to Steve Erickson, with many excellent stops in between; somewhere along the way, though, the purer-than-thou asceticism of that "authenticity" became a wearisome trope of its own. Looked at one way, Mitchell's lack of interest in rebellion (despite setting his novel at the

"Utopia Avenue" comfortably inhabits a genre, only to swerve away from it.

virtual ground zero of music-as-rebellion) constitutes a fresh take. Unfortunately, while the characters' happy-to-be-here vibe ironically plays as subversive, other aspects of Mitchell's scene-setting don't fare as well, particularly when it comes to the music itself. Guitar solos are "pyrotechnic"; Elf, the keyboardist, is twice described as playing "slabs of Hammond chords." Mitchell's song titles don't sound like song titles, and his pounding metrical lyrics don't really sound like lyrics:

What is plotted will unravel.
What is built slip out of joint.
Good intentions get forgotten.
Makes you wonder, what's the point?

But the most troubling play for that elusive authenticity comes in the numerous cameo appearances, within the narrative, by real-life rock stars. And they don't just get spotted from across the room, either; they say things. David Bowie, Brian Jones, John Lennon, Steve Winwood, Keith Moon, Sandy Denny, Syd Barrett, Jimi Hendrix, or, in this instance, Leonard Cohen:

"I'm not one of life's settlers. I came here [to New York] to write The—or just A—Great American Novel. I wince at the cliché. I fan-

cied myself a big fish in a small pond, but I wasn't even a fish. I *was* susceptible to distraction. Greenwich Village. Beatnik readings. Folk sessions. I went on long walks, posing as a *flâneur*, but only the French can get away with that. I watched the boats on the East River. Once, I took the elevator up there." Leonard nods at the Empire State Building. "I looked over Manhattan and was seized by an absurd desire to take it. To *own* it. Do we write songs as a substitute for possession?"

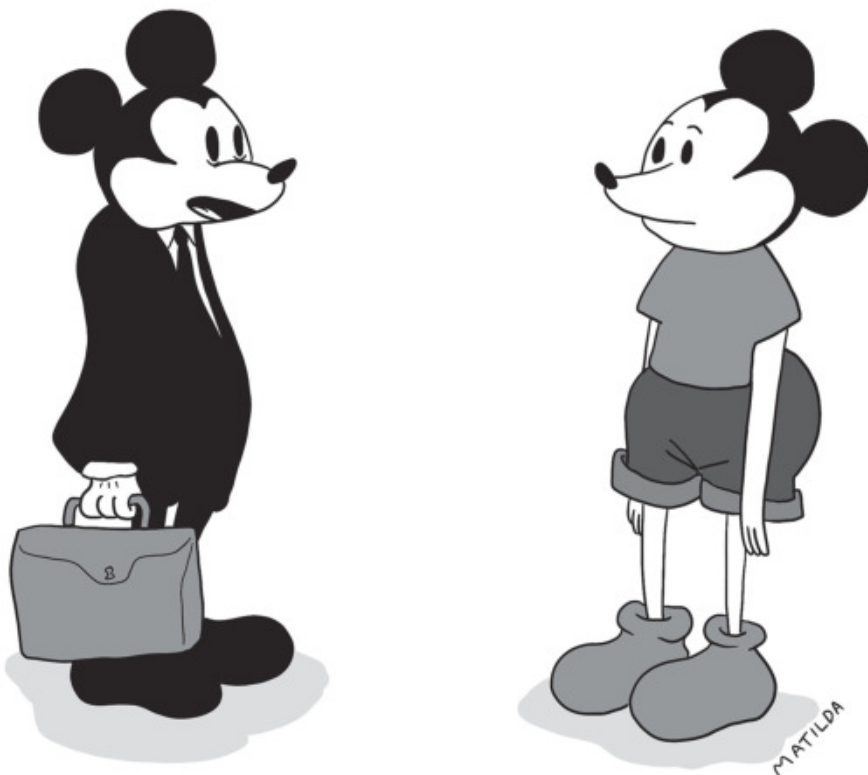
I find passages like this mortifying, though I recognize that many readers will not. The technique of incorporating real people into fictional narratives is an established literary convention, one that, like all techniques, can be employed well or badly. Still, it is one thing to stick into the mouth of a character of your own invention a clichéd line of dialogue such as "Problem is, if fame *is* a drug, it's hard to kick," but quite another, especially if you care about music at all, when Gene Clark, of the Byrds—Gene Clark, who wrote "I'll Feel a Whole Lot Better"—is made to say it. Or when Bowie says to a member of Utopia Avenue, "We met on the stairs last time, too . . . I was on my way up, then. Now I'm going down. Is that a metaphor?" Or when Allen Ginsberg says, "Don't believe *everything*

you read about me. . . . Just most of it." Or when Brian Jones says, "I come up with *tons* of ideas for Mick and Keith but all I get from them is sarcasm. I ought to write songs, you know. Even Wyman's got one on *Satanic Travesties*. That settles it. I begin. Tomorrow. Got any drugs?"

The aura of reality that these speeches are meant to enhance is undermined in most cases by the fact that the speaker devoted a lifetime to not talking like that. One can argue that Bowie's fame is now at such a level that anything goes, that he has ascended, Nixon-like, into the realm of imagination's raw material. But what did poor Gene Clark ever do to get dragooned into this pantomime? He led a brilliant, tragically short life, and, if you want to write a novelization of that life, have at it; but this is just opportunism. He should have been more famous than he was; one of the compensations of that should be that he is spared this deepfake afterlife as a poorly scripted spokesman for the real.

The swerve comes late in the novel's feel-good, rise-to-modest-fame narrative, though the groundwork, in retrospect, is visible throughout. Jasper, the band's gifted, eccentric lead guitarist, appears—to judge from the chapters narrated from his perspective—to be mentally ill, to a much greater degree than his bandmates and his manager suspect. As his delusions intensify, Jasper begins to hear an ominous knocking sound. Since no one else can hear it, its source would seem to be in his head. Yet he has heard it before, as a boy at an English boarding school; with the aid of a sympathetic schoolmate gloriously named Heinz Formaggio, he once traced the sound to a mirror, wherein he encountered not his own image but that of "a man, older, shorter than Jasper, with East Asian eyes, in ceremonial robes." A psychiatrist named Dr. Galavazi helped Jasper to quiet the knocking then. But now it is back.

Mitchell, whose novels range through different modes and genres with extraordinary facility, has a lucid, kinetic style at all times, but he is never more impressive than when writing in close third person about characters in altered mental states—captivity, physical pain,



"I go by Michael now."

madness. Here is Jasper, in an unsuspecting girlfriend's bed:

01:11 A.M., says her clock. A classical LP is on her Dansette. Jasper clicks the PLAY toggle. An oboe has lost its way. Upon hearing a violin in the thorns, the oboe picks a path toward it, metamorphosing into what it seeks. *It's beautiful and perilous.* Sleep pulls Jasper down, hypnotic fathoms down. *Nothing of her that doth fade, but doth suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange.* Far above, the hull of the steamer darkens the lilac sea. *Look.* A coffin sinks, trailing bubbles. Inside is Jasper's mother, Milly Wallace. From inside the coffin, Jasper hears a knock . . . knock . . . knock . . . Soft, yes, drowned, yes, persistent, yes, real? Yes.

Notwithstanding the pressures of growing fame—or the sudden availability of drugs, or the fact that three of the band members are straight men and the fourth is a woman—Utopia Avenue's interpersonal chemistry remains intact. As their sales and their reputation ascend, they weather individual, very un-rock-star-like personal crises: a death in the family, father issues, struggles to acknowledge sexuality. Jasper suffers mostly in silence, more and more tortured and unreliable, until finally, during a show in New York that seems like the leading edge of Utopia Avenue's conquest of America, he collapses onstage, apparently catatonic; and his interior world, for a time at least, supplants the reality outside it.

At which point, questions about the novel's genre bona fides, about its passing or failing any authenticity tests, are rendered moot; Mitchell had a different destination all along. Not unlike Jasper himself, "Utopia Avenue" turns out to have been a sort of host for something else entirely.

To go further would be to give too much away—not to everyone, perhaps, but certainly to readers of Mitchell's earlier work. Jasper's last name, de Zoet, will have tipped off such readers; in 2010, Mitchell published a historical novel called "The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet," about a Dutch trader in eighteenth-century Japan. He turns out to be Jasper's distant ancestor, a fact that casts the strange details of that hallucinatory mirror image in another light entirely. Indeed, for Mitchell devotees, alarms will have sounded throughout the novel (as throughout this review) at the mention of certain other names as well. Levon Frankland, the manager

with the unerring instincts: wasn't that also the name of a character in Mitchell's "The Bone Clocks" (2014)? Heinz Formaggio—wasn't there a Heinz Formaggio in "Ghostwritten" (1999)?

On the Internet there are wikis devoted to the universe of fictional characters in Mitchell's eight available novels (another, which is currently reposing in a time capsule, is slated to be published in 2114) and to tracking their appearances, whether major or minor, across multiple works. Only in a loose, nonrealistic sense are characters with the same name always the same characters; sometimes they're better understood as different incarnations, living different lives with the same soul. Six years ago, Mitchell was asked in an interview about these recursions across his oeuvre—whether he saw his books as "one contiguous whole" or as discrete entities laden with reader-friendly Easter eggs—and this was his answer:

For my first two or three books it was the latter. Now more and more it's the former. I'm beginning to see an über-book that overlays everything I write. Everything I write is an individual chapter. The answer has changed over time. I see it as an architect of an ever-morphing building that puts out tentacles, adds stories, and billows deeper. Very interesting!!

Few of these echoes in "Utopia Avenue" have plot ramifications. Jasper, at one point, stumbles onto an old recording of a sextet composed by Robert Frobisher, who is a central character in "Cloud Atlas" (2004). Elf, the keyboard player, who's trying to come to terms with her sexuality, gets involved with a woman named Luisa Rey, who has appeared in at least two other Mitchell books. Does it matter to the plot that Elf's girlfriend, who plays only a bit part in "Utopia Avenue," is Luisa instead of someone else? Not really; but it satisfies, because where we might have settled for a realistic randomness there is instead design.

What it all amounts to is that "Utopia Avenue" exists on two different planes. Jasper's suffering, his visions and auditory "hallucinations"—tragically, pathologically insubstantial to the other characters within the realistic landscape of the book—are, to the initiated reader,

quite real, more real than the various historical genre trappings, such as Carnaby Street, or the Chelsea Hotel, or zombie David Bowie. (In fact, the animatronic quality of the "real" characters is made a little more palatable by the thought that they might never have been there in the service of realism in the first place.) The sense of supernatural threat, of being pursued, for mysterious reasons, across time, as part of a conflict too large

for individual lifetimes to contain: this is the novel's reality, even as the characters (apart from Jasper) are oblivious of it.

There are a couple of ways to think about this. Mitchell's chef-d'œuvre remains "Cloud Atlas," an almost unsummarizable work of such narrative sweep and chronological scope as to make other "epic" novels seem as though they were symphonies composed on toy pianos. The recursions, the concordances within that novel—across cultures, across centuries—were thrilling, not least because they made you wonder how the author could possibly keep so broad a vision straight in his own head. Five novels later, though, the questions posed by all this connectivity feel different. The fact that a door in a hospital ward is oddly numbered "N9D," which is shorthand for "Number9Dream," the title of another Mitchell novel, or the fact that a rave review in the *Village Voice* of a Utopia Avenue album is written by Jerry Nussbaum (from "Cloud Atlas"): do these correspondences amount to claims about the world—about time's deceptive elasticity, about the butterfly effect of individual human lives—or simply about the work of David Mitchell? Is this a great writer of unfathomably long vision making a kind of Yoknapatawpha out of the entirety of space and time, or the rendering of something like fan service? Maybe both. Just as the members of Utopia Avenue themselves are the flip side of DeLillo's vision of rock music and its myth-scaled heroes, Mitchell's cross-referencing for its own sake could be the more benevolent, affirmative side of our era's taste for conspiracy, in which everything is improbably connected and there's a secret pattern that only the enlightened can see. ♦



UNDER PRESSURE

Musicians and composers react to the pandemic and to the protests.

BY ALEX ROSS



On May 27th, two days after a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd, Anthony McGill, the principal clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic, posted a recording of himself playing “America the Beautiful.” It is a rendition with a difference. McGill begins by swelling slowly into an initial G, from silence. When he reaches the portion of the melody matching the words “America, America,” he changes a high E-natural to an E-flat, thereby wrenching the key from C major to C minor. He remains in the minor mode to the end. Then he goes down on both knees, his clarinet behind his back, as if shackled, and bends his head.

The video, titled “TakeTwoKnees,” lasts about ninety seconds, but it has the weight of a symphonic statement.

McGill later recounted that he had been searching for some way to respond to Floyd’s killing. His wife, Abby, suggested “America the Beautiful,” and as he was trying out the song on his clarinet he played a wrong note and slipped into the minor, at which point he found his message. “We shouldn’t pretend like life and the world is always major because we want it to be,” he told NPR. “Sometimes life is minor. It goes off its true melody. It goes off of that simple, beautiful melody that we all expect it to be.” Jimi Hendrix’s dissonant fantasia

on “The Star-Spangled Banner” set a precedent for this kind of politically charged musical commentary, but McGill’s gesture has an eerie stillness, almost like a meditation. It has inspired a torrent of responses from other musicians. Billy Hunter, the principal trumpeter of the Metropolitan Opera, has offered a rendition of the national anthem that goes silent at the words “free” and “brave.”

African-Americans are severely underrepresented in classical music, although you wouldn’t necessarily know it from the frequency with which people of color are now featured in promotional brochures. Online discussions in the wake of nationwide Black Lives Matter protests have made clear how uncomfortable the role of a black classical musician can be. One day, with the collaboration of the Los Angeles Opera, the mezzo-soprano J’Nai Bridges led a Zoom panel on racial inequality with a distinguished group of colleagues: Julia Bullock, Karen Slack, Lawrence Brownlee, Russell Thomas, and Morris Robinson. After the singers described their reactions to Floyd’s killing and their own fraught encounters with the police, they addressed subtler but pervasive tensions in the opera world. Robinson spoke of the “perpetual paranoia” that he felt as a six-foot-three, three-hundred-pound black man: “I walk around every opera rehearsal I’ve ever been to guarded, cognizant of the fact that my interaction needs to be very public, in front of everyone and very innocuous. . . . This practicing safe distance has always been a practice of mine.” He revealed that he has never been hired by a black administrator, has never shared the stage with a black director, and has never taken a cue from a black conductor.

The conversation became even more piercing when Bullock queried the very gesture of gathering black singers to deliberate age-old racial disparities. To her, it seemed a possible cover for inaction. “What are we even doing here?” she asked. “We’ve *had* that conversation.” Thomas—who, like the others, lost his principal work in March—declared that one issue on his mind was whether he was going to have enough food to feed his family. I watched the video twice, noting how my own nagging unease affirmed the truth of what was being

The clarinetist Anthony McGill, playing “America the Beautiful” in a minor key.

said. Brownlee made the point with maximum directness: “Just like Alcoholics Anonymous, you have to state and realize that you have a problem.” Classical music, which is to say white classical music, has a problem.

The prevalent sensation of the world cracking in two—Willa Cather said this of the year 1922, and it might be said of 2020 as well—is palpable enough that I’ve been wondering how soon the rupture will leave traces in the work of composers. The lack of any immediate opportunity for performance has made it unlikely that composers will sit down to write the hour-long symphony they’ve been meaning to tackle, yet the coronavirus pandemic and its attendant isolation have already yielded some notable experimental scores. The turn toward protest may inspire a wave of work in a much different register. The strangeness of this moment lies in how it has pulled people both toward an extreme inwardness and toward an outward explosion of feeling. The radically expanded vocabulary of music since 1900 is equipped to span that divide.

One striking response to COVID-19 comes from the composer and intermedia artist Ash Fure, who has won notice for her sensorially engulfing sound environments, including the installation-opera “The Force of Things.” The prospect of creating works that could be heard only via streaming technology, with its compression of data, initially challenged her. She hit on the idea of composing an electronic piece that would pass into an acoustical environment assembled by listeners at home. After experimenting with various possibilities, she became fascinated by the sonic properties of Mason jars, which, when held up to the ears, act as filters, blocking certain sounds and highlighting others. The ghost ocean that we all heard in conch shells as kids is a related effect.

The result was “Interior Listening Protocol 01,” an eight-minute video piece that appeared on an online program by the International Contemporary Ensemble. The listener, equipped with a pair of Mason jars or tall glasses, mirrors movements that Fure makes in the video, for which Leah Wulfsberg supplied a hypnotic visual design. The audio component is a gradually mutat-

ing field of electronic noise, with deep bass tones periodically intruding. As you move the jars toward your ears, the general wash of frequencies drops out, and a shimmering spectrum of isolated tones emerges. When the jars cover your ears, the booming bass predominates. As Fure later explained to me, “Your skull becomes a kind of contact microphone—you’re hearing through the bones of your body.” I had my computer hooked up to speakers, through a digital-audio converter, and with the volume cranked up high those interior pulsations became disconcertingly intense. Fure had achieved her goal: far from being attenuated by digital transmission, her piece delivered an experience so vivid that I almost felt the need to lie down afterward.

On another day, I attended a virtual concert by the Nadar Ensemble, a Belgian new-music group. It was offering “FITTINGinside,” a participatory 2007 work by Stefan Prins. The score calls for audience members to walk outside a performance space, listening on earphones to a recording of a trombonist. They then go inside to see the trombonist in person, with city sounds encroaching through the earphones. For this online version, an audience of thirty-five signed in to a Zoom meeting and ambled around their neighborhoods for fifteen minutes, experiencing a montage of sights and sounds on their phones: the playing of the trombonist, Thomas Moore; visual feeds from other people’s walks; and a prepared ambient soundtrack. The bleeding together of these experiences was grippingly disorienting. Was that dog barking on my street or on one in Riga? Was that the noise of a motorcycle or a trombone? As I half blindly shuffled about, I drew a couple of reproving stares, to which I wanted to respond that I was no phone-addicted zombie—I was attending a global musical event.

An extensive library of COVID-era sound art has accumulated at AMPLIFY 2020: Quarantine, an online festival headed by Jon Abbey, of Erstwhile Records. Culled from experimental composers around the world, these projects conjure sonic otherness from the constricted, mundane circumstances of lockdown. In one recording, Choi Joonyong throws golf balls into a washing ma-

chine; in another, Stephen Cornford creates a moody soundscape with piano, amplified central heating, and cherry-tree twigs. I was especially haunted by Kate Carr’s “on every stair another stairway is set in negative,” which the composer describes as “a piece on lamentation and rage.” It is dominated by a murky old reel-to-reel tape of hymn-singing, run backward. The acoustic is that of an underwater canyon, but it was recorded in Carr’s bathroom, in London.

Lamentation and rage, artfully refracted, also surfaced in Bang on a Can’s second online marathon of the pandemic period, which took place on June 14th. Amid a slew of premières, the composer-cellist Tomeka Reid offered a new piano piece, “Lamenting G.F., A.A., B.T., T.M.,” which marks four recent killings of African-Americans: George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade. Following a technique made famous by Bach, Reid converts the letters into note names, with “M” becoming mi, or E, and “T” translated to C-sharp. Notes representing “B.,” “L.,” and “M.” also come into play. The work, which was given a full-bore performance by Vicky Chow, veers from shivery strummings of the interior piano strings to a kind of dissonant boogie-woogie frenzy and, finally, to an extended coda in a withdrawn lyrical mode, suggestive of speechless grief.

The Bang on a Can stream also travelled to Madison, Wisconsin, for an all-too-brief visit with Roscoe Mitchell—a founding member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, a titanic figure in avant-garde music, and a great African-American artist. Mitchell’s appearance had no explicit political message, but it carried immense weight all the same. He stood before a panoply of cymbals, bells, and other resonating percussion, with an array of paintings behind him—his own creations, in a vibrant, semi-Surrealist style. He began with a delicate wash of metallic timbres, and then picked up a soprano saxophone to issue a pointillistic smattering of tones. Like so much of Mitchell’s work, the performance conjured otherworldly vistas with economical means. Serene and severe, it gave its own unyielding answer to a history of hate. ♦

IN THE RUNNING

"Irresistible" and "Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The mood of the new Jon Stewart film, "Irresistible," is caught by the song at the start—Bob Seger's "Still the Same," from 1978. Listen to the upbeat cynicism: holding out for better times but guessing that nothing will change. "Moving game to game," Seger sings. "Turning on the charm/Long enough to get you by." That certainly fits Gary

private jet from the East Coast. Arriving in Deerlaken, he walks into a bar and, to the bemusement of the bartender, orders "a Bud and a burger." In a Hofbrau? Dummkopf.

Gary is on a mission. He has come to meet Jack Hastings (Chris Cooper), a.k.a. Colonel Jack, a retired marine, a farmer, and a widower. A video of him,

set adrift in the country. (The funniest specimen is Mr. Salter, the foreign editor of a major London newspaper in Evelyn Waugh's "Scoop," who braces himself for a trip to the mossiest backwoods of England. Travelling, he admits, "always upsets me.") Deerlaken is flustered by the political circus much as a quiet New England town was by the onslaught of a production company in "State and Main" (2000), and the image of Jack's daughter, Diana (Mackenzie Davis), with her arm stuck up the rear end of a cow is standard visual shorthand for the ickiness of the outdoors; Billy Crystal pulls the identical move in "City Slickers" (1991). In every case, we need to ask: is the movie mocking the slicker or channelling—wittingly or otherwise—his disorientation and his distaste?

The question is a serious one, in Stewart's new film, because it troubles his political good faith. He clearly despairs of a broken system, and his conscience naturally allies him with Colonel Jack. Yet the movie can't help tuning out the voices of the very people whose cause it seeks to espouse. Consider the sequence in which a group of locals are shocked to hear that Jack's Republican rival is now spending money on his own campaign. All we get are multiple shots of Gary's reaction to the news—comically overwrought, the implication being that these people are even greener and more primitive than he thought. Sure, he's the hero of the drama, in his wicked fashion, and, sure, Carell is the star. (As usual, he is half frozen in a rictus of desperation: eager to please, wherever possible, but basically hating people anyway.) Wouldn't it be nice, though, if Davis, for one, were allowed to get a word in edgewise? If you want to see a proper mayoral race, as noisy and as crowded as a sack of cats, try "Hail the Conquering Hero" (1944). It's a Preston Sturges film, which means a democratic overload: everyone gets a word in, all the time.

To be fair, "Irresistible" picks up in the final quarter, with the aid of a clever twist that whistles in from nowhere. We get an assortment of different endings, each undercutting the last. It's as if this dozy film has woken up, belatedly, to its comic responsibilities and opportunities. We even hear the director himself, over the end credits, quizzing Trevor Potter, the former chairman of the Fed-



Steve Carell stars as a Democratic political strategist in Jon Stewart's film.

Zimmer (Steve Carell), a Democratic strategist, who crawls from the wreckage of the 2016 election and goes hunting for fresh hope. Unexpectedly, he finds it in Deerlaken, Wisconsin. Or, as a title onscreen refers to it, "Rural America, Heartland U.S.A."

And that's the problem. The rural is an abstraction, somewhere out in the nation's midriff, beloved of political tacticians but rarely visited. (Hillary Clinton famously forgot, or neglected, to swing through Wisconsin during her campaign, and wound up losing the state.) And, even when it is visited, the heartland is all too easy to misread; we spot Gary, schmuckiness incarnate, looking up Wisconsin on Wikipedia as he munches baby balls of mozzarella on a

taken as he hymns the virtues of decency and public service during a town meeting, has gone viral, and Gary believes that such a fine fellow should stand for office not only in this conservative district but maybe far beyond. "He's a Democrat," Gary says. "He just doesn't know it yet." Grudgingly, Jack agrees to run for mayor, if Gary will take charge of the campaign. And so, lever by lever, the machinery of electioneering is cranked into life, from flyers and lawn signs to pollsters, number crunchers, and a war room stuffed with banks of monitors. If Mr. Smith won't go to Washington, Washington will come to Mr. Smith.

A noble tradition, not merely of movies, stretches out behind "Irresistible." Gary is an update of Aesop's town mouse,

eral Election Commission, about super PACs. Stewart reckons that he's found a loophole—a way to rook the whole damn racket and play it for a fool. So why make a movie about it? Why not pack a bag, take your plan to Heartland U.S.A., and try it out?

In a small fishing town on the Icelandic coast live Lars Ericksson (Will Ferrell) and Sigrít Ericksdóttir (Rachel McAdams). They are *not* brother and sister—or, as Lars is careful to add, “probably not.” In a tight-knit community, you can't always be sure. But he and Sigrít are tied in a kinship that is warmer than blood. Both of them worship the Eurovision Song Contest, the annual competition in which nations are brought together in jubilant harmony by the ritual torture and murder of three-minute pop songs. Lars and Sigrít, who perform as Fire Saga, dream of representing Iceland at the finals; how that dream pans out is told in “Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga.”

Has there ever been a title more hedged with nerves? Could it be that the movie's director, David Dobkin, is concerned that viewers might not have heard of Eurovision? It's as if Mel Gibson, on the brink of releasing “Braveheart,” had decided to rename it “The First War of Scottish Independence, 1296–1328: The Story of William Wallace.” What's touching about Dobkin's film is that the anxiety never fades. “Is Eurovision like ‘The Voice?’” an American asks. “No, it's *not* like ‘The Voice,’” Lars replies. All is explained, or foretold, in the opening credits, where we learn that the movie was made “in association with E.B.U.” This stands for the European Broadcasting

Union, the body that has overseen Eurovision since its birth, in 1956. What we are about to watch, in other words, is a promo masquerading as a satire.

Whether you *can* satirize the Eurovision Song Contest is another matter. The joke that has sustained Eurovision over the decades, and that feeds “The Story of Fire Saga,” is that the ardent gravity with which it is treated by the contenders stands in inverse proportion to their talent; where else can you witness such a mountainous range of human incompetence, in all its self-deluding glory? When I went to Oslo, in 2010, to report on the contest for this magazine, it was the first occasion since childhood on which I found myself weeping with laughter, sometimes through my nose. Would that Dobkin's film could summon such sweet tears.

There are smatterings of plot. By diktat, the country that triumphs at Eurovision has to host the competition the following year. That prospect alarms the governor of the Central Bank of Iceland (Mikael Persbrandt), who knows how ruinous the cost would be. He is therefore quite content that the Icelandic entrants should be Lars and Sigrít—a pair of guaranteed losers. So they fly to Edinburgh, where the contest is taking place; there, they go head to head against acts such as Belarus's Moon Fang, San Marino's Dalibor Jinsky (with “Hit My Itch”), and, from Sweden, Johnny John John. These artistes are fun, but no more so than the real ones who sprout forth in an average Eurovision year. That which already lies beyond parody is, by definition, impossible to lampoon.

It's not a bad strategy, inserting your fictional characters into a factual event.

Christopher Guest did it beautifully in “Best in Show” (2000), with his parade of purebred dogs and their crossbred owners. His observations rang with the bark of truth; patient and percipient, he seemed to happen upon the comedy of the situation, whereas Dobkin hurries to manufacture it—and, weirdly, takes half an hour longer to complete the job. As for Ferrell, a noted Eurovision nut, there's no mistaking his affection for the brave hogwash of the genre, but even he is felled by the movie's swerve into P.R.: a sing-along, say, in which genuine victors from Eurovisions past team up in a rolling medley. Look, there's Conchita Wurst! And Netta! And the cute lad with the violin! If these folks leave you blank, this may not be your film.

Yet all is not lost. However weak the thunder of this tale, it is stolen, with some flair, by Dan Stevens. Since quitting “Downton Abbey,” he has tried out one style of movie after another. He was a beefy killer in “The Guest” (2014), and the horned lead in “Beauty and the Beast” (2017). Only now, though, in the role of a Russian crooner named Alexander Lemtov—clad in shimmering brocades, and blow-dried to a feathery perfection—has Stevens discovered his calling. Alexander has a throbbing vibrato and a big thing for Sigrít. “You are beautiful and kind, I handsome and rich—this is typically *vairy* winning combination,” he tells her, proposing that she join him to forge a new duo. “I can throw in Fabergé egg, personal submersible, pet tiger.” When Eurovision comes storming back next year, *that's* what I want to see. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

THE NEW YORKER IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ADVANCE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS INC. COPYRIGHT ©2020 CONDÉ NAST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

VOLUME XCVI, NO. 19, July 6 & 13, 2020. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four combined issues: February 17 & 24, June 8 & 15, July 6 & 13, and August 3 & 10) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Piper Goodspeed, head of brand revenue strategy; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Wolfgang Blau, chief operating officer and president, international; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue; Anna Wintour, U.S. artistic director and global content advisor; Mike Goss, chief financial officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO THE NEW YORKER, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Write to The New Yorker, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037, call (800) 825-2510, or e-mail subscriptions@newyorker.com. Give both new and old addresses as printed on most recent label. Subscribers: If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. If during your subscription term or up to one year after the magazine becomes undeliverable, you are dissatisfied with your subscription, you may receive a full refund on all unmailed issues. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within four weeks after receipt of order. Address all editorial, business, and production correspondence to The New Yorker, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. For advertising inquiries, e-mail adinquiries@condenast.com. For submission guidelines, visit www.newyorker.com. For cover reprints, call (800) 897-8666, or e-mail covers@cartoonbank.com. For permissions and reprint requests, call (212) 630-5656, or e-mail image_licensing@condenast.com. No part of this periodical may be reproduced without the consent of The New Yorker. The New Yorker's name and logo, and the various titles and headings herein, are trademarks of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines, visit www.condenast.com. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, advise us at P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037, or call (800) 825-2510.

THE NEW YORKER IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RETURN OR LOSS OF, OR FOR DAMAGE OR ANY OTHER INJURY TO, UNSOLICITED MANUSCRIPTS, UNSOLICITED ART WORK (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DRAWINGS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND TRANSPARENCIES), OR ANY OTHER UNSOLICITED MATERIALS. THOSE SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS, ART WORK, OR OTHER MATERIALS FOR CONSIDERATION SHOULD NOT SEND ORIGINALS, UNLESS SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED TO DO SO BY THE NEW YORKER IN WRITING.



CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

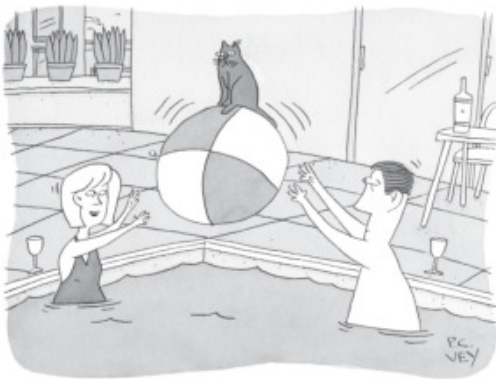
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Brooke Bourgeois, must be received by Sunday, July 12th. The finalists in the June 22nd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 27th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



“You’re right. It is easier with the ball.”
Keith Donohue, Wheaton, Md.

“He just loves finding new ways to be indifferent.”
Greg Smith, Portland, Ore.

“Remember, whoever drops him gets to dry him off.”
Wayne Anderson, Huntington Beach, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Tell me about a time you identified
a problem that others didn’t see coming.”*
Scott Smith, Toronto, Ont.

BORN IN LE BRASSUS



AUDEMARS PIGUET
Le Brassus

RAISED AROUND THE WORLD



AUDEMARS PIGUET BOUTIQUES : NEW YORK | ATLANTA | BAL HARBOUR
BEVERLY HILLS | BRICKELL | EAST HAMPTON | LAS VEGAS | MANHASSET